











**THE MAN  
WHO WON THE POOLS**

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## PART ONE: OXFORD

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### *Chapter One*

'TWENTY Camels, please,' Phil Tombs said, and put down two half-crowns. He put them down as if he was saying here was the end of his old life. And the fags would certainly take most of the second two-and-six. He was still dazed – still after all this checking and telegram-sending and waiting – and his mind was working queerly. Twenty camels. Fifty elephants. A hundred houris. Anything money can buy. It was a comedy – or it would be a comedy if he wasn't frightened of it.

'Camels, did you say?' The girl behind the counter accompanied the saucer of her arched eyebrows with a sharp glance. She was thinking there was nothing out of the way in a chap like him buying Yank cigarettes. She was thinking his kind often had more money than the Varsity lot. Only she was thinking he had made this particular demand so offhandedly he must be doing something rash.

Tombs seeing this in the young woman's mind felt panic again as he thought how wrong she was. He said, short but civil:

'Yes, please.'

She slapped down the fags and slapped down his change. It was a sixpence.

'Quite going it, aren't we?' she asked sarcastically.

He saw she was surprising herself, making a pass like this. It was a class tobacconist's, next door to one of the big colleges. Sometimes you would go in behind another customer and there would be nobody there except just this girl because the other customer would be away in the back with Mr Melchizedek – his name was – buying boxes of cigars. It might be a prosperous business type or it might be undergrads – not the scholarship ones idling on your taxes, since their money didn't run quite to *that*. The really wealthy ones, as you could tell at once.

Come to think of it he might have said to this girl, *A five-*

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*shilling cigar*. Only perhaps you don't say just that. There was this Ginger Grant from Glasgow got a girl said she was a secretary, so Ginger took her to a restaurant full of executives and said he wanted a bottle of Wee St George. Only he'd picked it up wrong and the word was French like the words for wines are. *Nuits* it was, meaning some place in France, and the girl laughed at him, which served him right for being so pitiful.

As for this girl in the fag-shop, probably she wasn't bad. In less expensive fag-shops a girl got credit for being ready with a bit of come-hither or cheek. But he'd been in here often enough to see that Mr Melchizedek – that was his name – discouraged the free-and-easy. Cold-and-lofty was what he approved, as if his girls didn't think much of anything short of selling Sobranies to royal dukes. Phil had seen it work, though. As the girls did their stuff he'd seen customers changing their minds and asking for something a bit more expensive than they'd intended. Yes, pitiful people are.

'What about a gold cigarette-case?' the young woman went on.

This time Phil grinned at her. He guessed it was his hair. The way it tumbled about his head cost him eight shillings a week, but there was always a chance of its paying off like now. He felt suddenly more secure. He stopped feeling like there was something wrong with his right buttock, where the newspaper was still in his hip-pocket that he'd checked and checked with.

He picked up the sixpence.

'Bottom of the packet,' he said, looking at it. 'Chips and vinegar for one. We'll have to get together another time.'

The young woman sniffed and went frozen up again. The lady, he thought – and he was grinning to himself now, because he liked language – had reassumed her professional manner. Because this customer had come in.

The customer was Phil's own age. His hair was short and brushed down, with no oil on it. He was tall and fair and free from pimples, as if he bought health soaps and things a lot. He was togged in the more casual sort of clothes for riding a horse in, and he had a flowery affair like a woman's scarf arranged where a man would wear a good American tie. You could see

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at once he'd come in to do a bit of creating. But in an easy confident way Graceful nonchalance of the aristocracy.

'I say!' The newcomer spoke almost before the bell had stopped ringing on the door 'It's absolutely too bad. Is your manager in? Tell him it's Sir Aubrey Moore.'

Phil winked at the young woman but she ignored him. Before she could speak there was the scraping of a hastily moved chair in the back shop Then in came this oldish silky man with a nasty gliding action like he was on a belt and not on legs Mr Melchizedek of course Phil lingered He needed his mind taken off things It was queer that he did, but Christ he did.

'Good afternoon, sir. I 'opes that you are receiving hevry satisfaction, sir '

Mr Melchizedek was softly rubbing his hands together, in the way they always make his toady-sort do on the telly. He was a foreigner of course, and his aitches didn't seem to behave in an honest way – not either in one honest way or the other. Phil registered this at once You can't be a Tombs in Oxfordshire, any more than you can be a Timms or a Belcher or a Pratley, and not be very aware of how foreigners and aliens come seeping in I like how Radiators and Pressed Steel and Lucys have them from all over, and now blacks, very decent chaps, on the buses

'It's this mixture you make up for me, you know. My personal mixture, dash it And it's as dry as dust' Sir Aubrey Moore tossed in open tobacco-pouch on the counter. It hadn't a coat of arms or even a monogram but it looked expensive. 'Just take a glance at the stuff '

Phil wondered whether he could toss down any rejected article just like that It was tossing, all right Only there was more to it than that. The chap had it so that he could be insolent without being not polite Phil, whom the laws of electricity were training to get things accurate, had just graphed the young man's manner like this when he saw that Mr Melchizedek wasn't worried Mr Melchizedek was fingering a pinch of the tobacco, and over his pasty face there was coming a kind of pitying but respectful smile.

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'No,' Mr Melchizedek said. 'No, sir – I think not.' He looked up at the young man and gently shook his head. You realized that he had nicely dressed silver hair, so fine that it stirred gently in the breeze of his own soft movements. He might have been the old family butler, remembering how he'd dandled the infant baronet or whatever he was on his knee, and putting him right now on some silly thing he'd said about the old crusted port or the champagne.

'I venture to suggest, sir,' Mr Melchizedek said, 'that you 'ave neglected one factor, sir. A very simple and very himportant factor if I may say so, sir. The 'igher class of tobaccos, sir, 'as the moisture scientifically hextracted from them.' Mr Melchizedek closed the pouch and handed it gently back to Sir Aubrey. 'A great pleasure, sir. A great pleasure to be of service at any time, sir. Thank you, sir. Good afternoon, sir.'

Phil didn't look at the young man. It didn't seem fair. But he tried another wink at the girl. This time, he thought, she'd have done a snort of laughter if she hadn't been scared of Melchizedek. So Phil put one hand into the front pocket of his jeans – for her benefit, that was – and with the other swung open the door and went out. Male and arrogant, he thought. And he crossed Carfax and walked up Cornmarket Street.

There had been a big bell jangling for some reason in one of the colleges. But here the noise of traffic drowned anything of the sort at once. It was plain these places weren't what they had been when there was nothing but Varsity around. You could see that old Oxford set-up in the plans, enlarged to the size of murals, that Woolworth's decorated their side windows with. He'd thought of going into Marks and Sparks, but now he thought he'd go across and into Woolworth's. There was nothing he wanted to buy but he'd walk round. It was the biggest Woolworth's in the country, they said, and hadn't *he* to think big? He went across.

It was clever. It was clever the way the covered part, before you came to the doors, half sucked you in under the bright lights, specially if it was wet. And those great squashy letters WOOLWORTH must be psychology; they must be that as they certainly weren't art. He went in.



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Phil Tombs passed where the kids got ice-cream and threaded through the idle-buy counters near the doors which were psychology too. He'd go down to Electrical Appliances, where he had professional standing, so to speak, and see if there was anything new. The whole place was pretty full. It was all on one floor, all except the cafeteria, and he wondered about the ventilation which was O.K. He wondered what went on on the floors above. Executives in offices, he supposed, some of them smoking Melchizedek's cigars. It must be better fun for a girl working here than in Melchizedek's – except that here you were right out in the open, with customers all round you. It's psychology that it's good to have a wall to put your back to, they say.

He stood still, so that women with parcels and women with children bumped into him, and a man carrying some doubled-up metal curtain-rod pretty well jabbed him in the neck. He was trying what it would be like to be one of these girls – in a sort of pen with these little trays all round, and beyond that always people fingering things or waving ten-bob notes at you. He turned round as if he was facing customers, and then turned round again, so that people must have thought he was cracked. Then it occurred to him that a store detective might come along and be suspecting him. So he hurried on. He didn't know what it was that sometimes made him do these fool things.

He never got to Electrical Appliances, because he stopped again, and this time it was without really knowing it. It was all these people, and all these things – small cheap things mostly, in all these trays and on all these shelves. And there were all the other Woolworth's, and Marks and Sparks all over the place, and Littlewood's, and Great Universal Stores, and the people that used to be the Fifty Shilling Tailors, and the Elegance Taste Economy people and you couldn't say what. There was so much of it all and of everybody – the same sort of people buying the same sort of things and covering up the same sort of bodies with them or fixing them up on Sunday afternoons in the same sort of houses – that it could only be meaningless. He felt unaccountably scared. So he had to hurry

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out of Woolworth's, as if suddenly he'd been told he didn't belong there. And perhaps no more you do, he thought. The place could belong to you now, in a manner of speaking. So you no longer belong to it. Write your bleeding autobiography, and call it *Outside Woolworth's*. A good title. But perhaps it wouldn't be a very good book.

Outside Woolworth's there was a newspaper woman and posters. Phil went past keeping his glance away. It was like hunted-man stuff. You stop at a corner, with the collar of a stolen coat up round your mouth, and there suddenly is this poster with a photograph of you. A corner of it gets loose and flaps in the wind. A few fallen leaves scurry by. Then a bit of old newspaper blows across the street, catches on the poster, blots out the photograph just as a dick or some nosey old woman might be glancing at you and then turning to look at it. You pull the collar higher and hurry on. And the wind is icy in the streets and you haven't got the price of a cup of coffee left.

Phil turned into George Street. He found his hand was still in that front pocket, like he'd put it in a bit of sexy swagger for Melchizedek's girl. It was clutching his sixpence change. The last sixpence of his old life. Through the thin lining, close to where his tight-fitting X Fronts left off, he rasped the milled edge of the coin against his groin. *Face it*, he said to himself. *Begin to think it out. About Beryl, for instance, and all that.*

Instead of thinking, he looked around, that being easier. It was getting on for six, the time in Oxford you begin to get what some book calls the two nations in the streets. Of course you get them all day: always those undergrads and their professors; always plenty of town folk – women in from Cowley and the housing estates shopping, clerks hurrying importantly around to hand each other bits of paper. But it's in the evening you get this split-up affair of young men: the undergrads again, in twos mostly and smiling and talking rapidly; lads from Morris's and that, more in fours and sixes, laughing and shouting like they were paid for it, sweeping the pavements

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line-abreast where there are no dicks about. Fancying themselves regular Teds, a lot of them, but not much good at it and through with it in eighteen months. They have girls after that and don't come much to the centre of the city, a part inconvenient for what they're mostly thinking about. Another eighteen months and somebody's got careless, so that it's all waiting for a house and doing crazy sums about the never-never. Sort of so many Ages of Man, and that's several blewed before you notice. Of course in the electrical trades you're a bit apart from it; you have your standards. Still, he'd done that Ted stuff himself a bit before latching on to Beryl. And for some reason he'd dressed a bit young this evening. The word was nostalgia, he told himself.

Suddenly he knew he was hungry. He'd better have something before he went home – since what he'd have to face *there* there was no telling. Hour of destiny, perhaps. Facing it at least for a minute *now*, and therefore a bit absent about what he was doing, he went into this Pompadour. Never been there before. He could see at once it was cheap. He could see it was rather an undergrad place. Didn't matter, of course. He sat down at the counter and ordered something from a man in a tall white cap affair. Pretending to be a chef.

Phil didn't know why he did it, and it must have been just because he was disturbed. But as the man turned away, Phil made some fool gesture above his own head.

'Pitiful,' he said.

'Pitiful,' a voice agreed in his ear. And it added something quite unintelligible.

'What's that?' Phil turned and stared.

'*Cucullus non facit monachum*,' repeated the voice.

Phil noticed the repetition wasn't quite confident. It was rather as if the speaker felt he might have got one of his words wrong.

'Come again,' Phil said. The speaker's being an undergrad made him use this cheap Yank challenge.

'The cowl, or whatever it is, doesn't make the monk. And that affair doesn't make the chap able to cook.'

Phil took a quick, shy look at the person on the next stool.

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It was another young man of his own age, just as it had been in Melchizedek's. This one had dark hair cut in a straight fringe just above his eyebrows like a kid's. He was wearing cavalry twills and a draught-board jersey with a neck that came right up round his chin. He was looking at Phil a bit shyly in turn. Talking that Latin, or whatever it was, he must have been taking Phil for an undergrad. But he couldn't think that for long.

'It's a soft job,' Phil said contemptuously. 'Slapping out fish and slush.'

'No, it isn't.' The young man spoke with an air of authority. 'Not among all those ovens and hot plates on a sticky day. No fun at all.'

The young man said 'fun' like it might rhyme with 'Goon' in 'Goon Show'. So Phil knew at once that this wasn't a public schoolboy. He was one of the ones that was at the varsity on that bleeding PAYE, all right. Grammar School after the Eleven-Plus, and stayed there, and then everything paid out of what was missing from his, Phil Tombs's, pay packet. At the end of the Varsity term, likely enough, he'd return to Nottingham or Leeds to a home very like Phil's own.

This discovery didn't in itself at all make Phil take to his neighbour. If he had to choose a companion to live on a desert island with, he thought, he'd as soon have Sir Aubrey What-had-his-name-been as a jumped-up kid out of his own class. On the other hand, Phil had rather liked being casually addressed, even in gibberish, by an undergrad. Here they were, side by side, and a bit of talk was only sensible. Phil, who liked things to make sense, and who suspected that he was soon to be at grips with things that somehow didn't, felt he should manage a civil reply.

'What d'you think he pulls in - him with the white cap?' he asked.

'Ten pounds. That, and a bit of overtime. I know, because I've done it myself.'

'Done it yourself?' Phil was puzzled. 'Before becoming an undergrad?'

'No. Last Long Vac.'

'Last long what?'

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'In the holidays – the university holidays. It helped a bit at home. And, after that, I had £30 left to get to Italy on.'

Remembering Cyprus, yet aware of unknown worlds, Phil asked truculently:

'What did you want to be going to Italy for?'

'It must have been to further my education. At least, I got an extra £15 from my college's travel fund on that assumption.' The young man seemed to reflect that Phil mightn't make much of this note. 'I loved Italy,' he said. 'And it's very queer, you know – seeing so many staggeringly beautiful things which one already has a notion of from pictures.'

'I can't say *I've* ever seen Italian pictures like that,' Phil glanced at the young man, and was aware of misunderstanding. 'Nothing but slums and starvation and thievery in the pictures that have come *my* way. But bleeding well-made, some of them.'

'Of course the poverty's frightful.' Phil could see that the young man was anxious to deny taking only an arty view of the Wops and their country. 'Particularly in the south. And they say Sicily's worst of all. Did you hear Danilo Dolci?'

'Dolci?' Phil was mystified by what appeared to be an abrupt change of subject. 'Would he be one of those crooners in Saturday Club?'

'No, he's nothing like that.' The young man flushed under his kid's fringe, just as if he felt it had been him and not Phil who had said something silly. 'A chap who's done astonishing things among absolutely destitute people there in Sicily. He was talking about it in the Town Hall not long ago.'

'Never heard of him, I'm sure.' Phil accompanied these ungracious words with a carefully uncouth gesture to the man in the white cap, who responded by slapping him out another portion of sausage and tomato. Then he realized that he had no honest impulse to act tough. 'I'll bet,' he said, jerking a thumb towards the white-capped man, '*he* doesn't spend his ten quids on going off to Italy. Still, that was quite an idea of yours. The Leaning Tower and the Pope and the Lido, all done on fish and slosh.' He found himself giving his new acquaintance a friendly grin. 'Not that ten quid's much for

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a week's work. We get that during strikes for no work at all.'

'Cowley?'

'Uhuh. But I'm getting out. Telecommunications for me.' Phil hesitated, remembering that this was perhaps no longer true. 'After finishing some exams at the 'Tec,' he added doggedly.

'You said ten pounds?' The young man was staring at Tombs in honest respect. 'You don't mean that strike benefit -?'

'Strike benefit my foot. We get a flat ten quid from the bosses when we're laid off because there's a strike in Birmingham, and the blokes in Birmingham get a flat ten quid from the bosses when there's a strike here in Oxford. See? Seems to be the way we're fixing it, since that bleeding General Election.'

The young man with the fringe suddenly banged the formica-topped, coffee-slopped counter in front of him. The action startled Phil quite a bit.

'But don't you see,' the young man demanded, 'that Labour lost the Election because that was the way everyone was thinking to fix it already? Putting their shirt on industrial action and the hope of another ten bob a week? And letting political action, which is the only ultimately effective weapon, go to the devil?'

'I don't take much stock of all that.' Phil changed his friendly grin to an expression which he intended to be contemptuous. 'Never been uppety, I haven't. Never been paid, like you lot, to spend all day with the weight off my feet, nosing through books.'

The young man appeared to consider how best to take this. It was obviously to give himself time to think that he ordered a cup of tea. He didn't - not in a place like this, he didn't - secure service as rapidly as Phil did.

'Probably you were cheated of it,' the young man said. 'Education, I mean. The bloody fraud of the Opportunity State. Cheated just as blatantly as if the Prime Minister himself had slunk up and pickpocketed your last sixpence.'

'Had done *what*?' Phil felt a sudden horrid sinking inside. He stared at his second portion of sausage and tomato. He'd

been crazy. A last sixpence was precisely what he had – and it wouldn't pay for half the first plateful, let alone this one.

'The whole educational ladder's weighted against the – working-class child.' The young man had hesitated, and Phil thought it was perhaps because he was thinking that ladders aren't things you weight against a chap. But no – it was because the words 'working-class child' had worried him. Self-conscious about it, you might say.

'Rotten primary schools,' the young man went on. 'Rotten old text-books. Parents hostile or indifferent to the whole idea of grammar school. And the struggle goes on like the ten little niggers. Sixteen working-class children out of a hundred pass the Eleven-Plus. But only one of those gets as far as the university.'

'Two,' Phil said – and at once felt better about his approaching moment of bankruptcy. You can't work with electricity without respecting figures.

'All right, two. The point is that *you* might have been a little nigger later on, just because of some rotten unfairness or another, even if you *had* passed your Eleven-Plus.'

Phil laughed – so loudly that the girl behind the tea-urn stared at him in cold disapproval. Recklessly he waved at her to give him a cup.

'*That!*' he said. 'You couldn't *not* pass that if you was paid for it. And as for hostile parents, my uncle made me take extra lessons for the flipping thing from an old wife down our street. And passed it in spite of her, I did.'

'Then you *were* at a grammar school?' The young man asked this with inoffensive surprise. The grammar, he was clearly thinking, hadn't stuck.

'Christ, I was. And out again as quickly as I could get them to put a boot in my bottom, man. Took a look at Latin and all that, and just knew I had to go either technical or cracked. Yes, I'd have been psychological by the time I was eighteen if I hadn't got out of it.'

'It must have taken a bit of nerve.' From under the black fringe the young man was again looking at Phil respectfully.

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'But you're lucky, probably. You'll make more money out of your telecommunications than I'll ever do after reading P.P.E.'

'What's that mean?'

'Philosophy, Politics, and Economics.'

'I see.' Phil noticed the lack of any edge, this time, to his own voice. Suddenly, he was feeling rather depressed. It was as if he'd been sitting drinking beer for a long time, and not this stuff meant to taste like char? 'You at one of these colleges?' he asked abruptly, although he knew perfectly well that the young man was. 'Know a friend of mine, name of Sir Aubrey Moore?'

'Aubrey Moore?' The young man turned towards Phil, so that the fringe parted like a theatre-curtain above his nose. 'I know him by sight. He's at my college. But I've never spoken to him. He's a most frightful bloody.'

For a moment Phil was puzzled. Then he understood. 'Do you mean,' he asked, 'Two Nations - that sort of thing? Even inside your bleeding college?'

'Four, I'd say.' The young man had flushed slightly, almost like he was a teacher starting to give the kids a talk on sex. 'Etonians, for a start. And perhaps Wykehamists. Then all the people from all the other public schools.'

'That's two? Wouldn't it be a bit a matter of dads and so on, as well as schools?'

'Yes, of course. There are cross-currents one would never get to understand, even if one wanted to. But, roughly, that's two. And then there are two quite distinct lots from grammar schools. And it's nothing *but* dads, this time. White-collar dads - the lower-middle class, in fact. And then plain proletarian dads, like mine who's a coalminer.'

'I see.' Phil, having an inquiring mind, found this interesting. It wasn't, on the other hand, very important. At least it wouldn't be, except for this odd thing that was due to happen.

'That about this Moore being a friend of mine,' he said. 'It was only a crack, of course.'

'Well, that was the explanation that did just cross my mind.'



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The young man with the fringe smiled briefly – it was something he didn't often do – and then looked serious again. 'My name's Peter Sharples,' he said hurriedly.

'Mine's Phil Tombs.'

Phil said this and waited. There were those who said 'Work in the cemetery, I suppose?' like they were asking for one on the clock. And there were those who refrained.

'Pitiful tea they do you here,' Sharples said.

This Pompadour was filling up so that you began to think there was something wrong with your elbows. There was a narrow shelf along one wall, and these pillars with shelves round them, and stools so narrow you felt you were perching on the end of a pole. But mostly people stood about, and he'd been wrong about its being chiefly undergrads. In the centre it was Teds and some girls lounging round, like the place was a straight coffee-bar juke-box joint down St Ebbe's. But there was a group of Wops over by the Espresso, and if the crush went on like this they'd soon be able to get around to pinching the girls' behinds, which is a Wop's chief idea of fun. And there were five or six Yanks off an airfield, crew-cut and drinking cokes like kids, only it wasn't much like kids that their eyes went up and down when there was a girl to be let know that their eyes were going up and down *her*. It was hot and airless in here and there were a lot of smells around, and when Phil looked at these three plastic oranges they always have churning round under glass on the surface of the orange squash he almost felt giddy for a moment and he wasn't sure that they didn't suggest something. But now he looked at the undergrad Peter Sharples who had said nothing about filling tombs. Then he surprised himself by the question he asked Peter Sharples straight out.

'What would you do,' Phil asked – and because he'd finished his char he was rasping that sixpence in his groin again – 'with twenty thousand pounds?'

'That's an easy one,' Sharples said, and got out a packet of cigarettes. 'Smoke?'

'Thanks.' Phil took a cigarette. They were common fags,

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and he somehow didn't feel like bringing out his Camels and suggesting an exchange. Once he had read a book called *Inside Oxford* or something like that, so he wasn't surprised that Sharples wasn't surprised by his question. He knew that the undergrads sit up all night asking each other questions and usually nothing personal involved. Taught to exercise unsleeping intellectual curiosity was what the book had said. He'd rather be taught telecommunications himself, but he saw the idea – which was something he hadn't been sure the man who wrote the book had. Perhaps if you had a real line on unsleeping intellectual curiosity yourself you didn't write books with names like *Inside Oxford*. But now Sharples was answering him.

'Twenty thousand?' Sharples said. 'I'd be an M.P. before I was in my thirties.'

'But what would you *do* with it?'

'Invest it, of course. I could invest it perfectly safely so that it would bring in a thousand a year. Then I could afford to take a job on low pay on the Labour Party Research Unit, and begin nursing a constituency as well.'

'How d'you know you'd get a constituency?'

'I'm not a moron, Phil. I'll quite possibly get a First in Schools. And a thousand a year would be just the job after that. Bless their egalitarian hearts. They'd jump at me.'

Not all of this speech was meaningful to Phil Tombs, who was much struck, however, by the casual way in which he had been called Phil.

'You a socialist, Peter?' he asked. 'Would you still be a socialist if you had that twenty thousand?'

'Of course I should – and a much more effective one at that.'

'You don't think a lot of money is likely to change a man?'

'If he's any good, he'll use it to change himself the way he *wants* to change himself. Of course there would be pitfalls. But I don't think twenty thousand is enough to bring you much in the way of the really serious ones.'

'Not *enough*?' Phil made an effort to get hold of this point of view. It was a matter of orders of magnitude, was it for what?'

he demanded. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the man in the white cap was making out a bill.

'Well, a life of dissipation, for instance. A thousand a year wouldn't take you far on that.'

'Happen not.' Phil picked up the bill, looked at it with a great air of casual interest, and dropped it again. 'But you could have a pretty hot year or two if you blew the whole capital.'

'Is that what you'd do?' Peter Sharples did now seem to be a little wondering what this was in aid of. And he had paid his own bill. Farther down the counter, the man in the white cap was pretty well driving a couple of lingering customers from their stools. There wasn't long to go. Phil put his hand up to his collar and tugged at it like he was in pain. 'What would I?' he asked with some genuine inattentiveness. 'Search me if I blamed well know.' He gave another tug, and then contrived to sway alarmingly on his stool. 'Bleeding hot in here.' He glanced behind him, being anxious to see whether the Pompadour kept much in the way of staff on this side of the counter. There really was a terrific crush. 'No bleeding air.' He did a rapid rocking movement this time, first bumping into Peter Sharples's shoulder and then into a hunched-up man who was noisily eating soup on his other side. He raised his voice to a pitch at which there was no chance of its being neglected. 'Believe,' he said loudly, 'I'm going to pass out.'

'Easy with your shoving, there.' The hunched-up man had straightened himself and turned indignantly towards Phil, soup dribbling down his chin. Then his expression changed. 'You going to be sick?' he said.

This was better than could have been hoped for. Phil gave a retch and this time pitched straight forward. Everybody immediately round about was aware of him now, and he became the subject of a widening circle of comment.

'Chap passed out.'

'Young chap puking all over the counter.'

'Not surprised ... worse'n a submarine ... anyone would faint.'

''Ere, I can't see. Lemme look.'

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'Eaten their bloody prawns, I expect. Fatal this time of year. . . . Stop shoving, can't you?'

'Now then, order please.' The man with the white cap was leaning angrily over the counter. 'Let him have a bit of air, can't you?'

At this Phil lifted his head rapidly.

'Air!' he said loudly, and dropped it again.

'You're his friend, aren't you?' The man in the white cap addressed Peter Sharples challengingly. 'Get him to the door, for Christ's sake, before he really is sick. He's only groggy. Get him on his feet can't you? How often have I told the boss the ventilation here's a disgrace? Take him out and let him breathe a bit. Gangway there, please. No crowding. Nothing but a patron slightly indisposed.'

The indisposed patron was already on his feet and – although leaning picturesquely on the arm of his friend – making pretty good speed for fresh air. The crowd in the Pompadour parted, gaped curiously, closed up again as he went by.

For a moment Phil's head positively lolled on Sharples's shoulder.

'Peter,' he hissed, 'when we're out – *run!*'

And they ran – Phil because that was the extravagant plan that had come to him, Sharples because simple manhood would admit of nothing else. There were a few angry shouts as they pelted down George Street. These didn't matter at all. And then, very disconcertingly, there was a blast on what could only be a policeman's whistle. Shoulder to shoulder, they ran on panting. Once they glanced sideways at each other, excited and very scared. They were back in the same sort of childhood, a childhood in which there had been much bolting from coppers who were commonly imaginary but sometimes real, and in which awesome talk went round of borstals and remand homes and what happened if they got you there.

## *Chapter Two*

THEY parted very casual, Phil and Peter, outside the gaol, since they had swung round that way after running to the end of New Inn Hall Street. It looked as if the copper hadn't blown his whistle after them at all, but perhaps just after some fool motorist crashing the lights up by what Peter called the Corn. Imaginary coppers right enough, Peter said, just like when he and his gang had used to be raiding the condemned back-to-backs behind the Gas Works for the waste-pipes in the kitchen sinks.

Better part outside the gaol than inside, Phil said. But, although they both laughed like anything, a man could have told they were surprised with themselves – Phil because he'd never done this sort of thing before, only heard of it or sometimes watched it, and Peter because it was like something in the library catalogue, *Memories of My Dead Life*. And Phil had done it because he was excited and it looked as if he was upset about this thing he hadn't let on about, and Peter had done it because they'd been pals for outside of a half-hour or so.

Only Peter Sharples, of course, had paid his bill. And now he said a queer thing.

'What'll you do?' he said, still flushed and laughing. 'Send them a P.O.?'

Just for the moment, Phil thought he was adding a bit to the joke. But no, Peter meant it – which to Phil's mind was to ditch the joke altogether. And Phil ought to have gone straight to that vocabulary he kept and fished out something about the creeping paralysis of bourgeois morality. That would have been a good one. But all he managed was to say 'Well, p'raps' awkwardly and unconvincingly, and this had the effect of making their parting a bit flat. He thought of saying careless, 'What's that college of yours call itself?' but it turned out he didn't care to. Anyway, there'd be something in the Reference Library that gave the names of all the undergrads and their

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colleges, if he ever wanted to get on to this Peter Sharples again. So he said 'So long' like it might be to a man in the next street. Only, fifteen yards on he turned his head and gave a wave, and he gave a grin too that said they'd had a bit of fun all right.

He'd walk down to the corner by King's where perhaps he'd look at the motor-bikes. And then he'd go back by Quaking Bridge, and if anything had broken at his auntie's – well, that was it.

You might get rid of the old machine, Phil said experimentally to himself as he put his nose like a kid to King's window. You might have a brand new Ducati 125, one of the best of the Italian jobs. Cut your time to the works by seven minutes or eight, he said to himself, experimenting again.

But the Ducatis didn't somehow look as interesting as they'd looked a week ago. Not my class, he said to himself sardonically as he walked on – and realized that he'd taken a first quick look at the heart of the matter. It made him want to walk faster and farther, so over the bridge he went straight on past Morrell's, and past the boozer Morrell's has right on the spot, and then down the Hamel. Light, a bit of stray evening light was glinting back at him from the gasometers straight ahead, and the smell of that morning's cattle market was coming at him from the left, and then he passed the Duke of York and was in what some funny had named New Street. The funny must have planted down New Street where there wasn't anything before, and been so proud of it that he'd called it *New Street* just like that. Perhaps it was the same genius who, a stone's throw away, had planted down Gas Street, and called it *Gas Street*. Think of that, Phil asked himself. Think of building two rows of houses for human beings to live in, and calling the result Gas Street.

He went on down New Street till he came to the Primitive Methodists 1843. He always stopped there – it was an example of that damnfool habit he had of stopping like he was one of the absent-minded professors the rest of the town was built for. You'd think the Primitive Methodist crowd had never got

much beyond their first primitive state, whatever that was. The place looked it hadn't even been broken into by tramps for a hundred years, and opposite it was this random patch of demolition, as if somebody had had a good idea but hadn't got very far with it. And straight ahead down New Street, down this vista – that was the word – of Victorian or whatever it was meanness, shining in that evening light that could do something even with the gasometers, was Christ Church College's tower – only it wasn't a tower but a sort of pepperpot such as giants might own if they had a fancy for everything superior around them. Phil Tombs looked at this tower, Tom Tower, closing the vista of New Street, and told himself that you don't get things as ruddy beautiful as that by accident. And not just by paying up neither, he told himself. The bleeding thing means something. So, for that matter, does the Primitive Methodists 1843. Buildings do mean things. Funny how everything solid expresses something that isn't solid at all.

He might go on to Carlo's, they'd be frying there, and take a bit of fish back to auntie, she liked that. He might put off getting back by going a bit farther round still – say to the Poodle Parlour at the corner of Wood Street: it always tickled him as something really silly and innocent, a Poodle Parlour did. But no, he must go home.

And a queer sort of home it was, he told himself as he now walked rapidly on. A queer sort of home for anybody, let alone for him who had been making fourteen nicker a week these last six months. But for a long time he'd thought he'd keep on with auntie until he could move out with her to one of the estates; and then when it became clear she wasn't going to move, thank you, not until they took the roof off her, he'd stayed on because it seemed the only thing to do about her. And a daft and dirty old wreck of a woman she was heading to be, he thought dispassionately.

Suddenly there was a whistle and a yell from some way ahead, and then a second yell answering the first, and after that three kids on bicycles came hurtling out of different side roads like they were hunting someone and had picked up a hot scent. You less and less saw kids at all around these streets – or

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anybody else for that matter, since half the houses were empty and most of the others sheltering old crawlers like auntie. There was something cheerful about the way these three came hurtling towards him, two on flash bikes all gears and bells and lamps and water-bottles and gleaming handlebars, and the third on an old bone-shaker might have been off a heap of scrap. But they were all the same sort of kids, and Phil knew them well enough - young Arthur and Harry Griffin from the top of his own street, and the third was from the entry just beyond the local, only he'd never known his name.

'Hi' ya!' Phil called out to the kids, because somehow there seemed to be a hell of a lot of life in them. And they yelled and whistled and came hurtling on, and he saw there must be something they were wild with excitement about. They were staring at him wide-eyed, and he thought they were going to shout something understandable when suddenly Harry Griffin that was in front swerved to the gutter and did a turn-about at speed in the narrow street that you'd think would have made him a fortune on the dirt-track. The other two followed, and the kid whose name Phil didn't know nearly came a cropper, probably because of a bit of wheel-wobble on his old machine; and then all three were in full retreat up the road, as if Phil was something out of a flying saucer they were going back to headquarters to report about.

He went on. It was near dusk now, and that was the time the place looked more than ever like the week after the Last Days of Pompeii. Only the folk hadn't vanished beneath lava or whatever it was, but had been shunted out to one estate or another: Minchery Farm or Wood Farm or Blackbird Leys, without much wanting, most of them, to be as truly rural as such fool names sounded. And each lot shunted out meant another rat-hole of a house waiting for demolition. Only it all happened a bit slowly, because of the nature of the bourgeois mind, and at the Town Hall they kept on drawing up no end of plans, full of arterial roads and civic amenities and what have you, and meanwhile the kids broke any windows that were left, and sometimes chaps came and boarded them up, and sometimes nobody bothered.



## OXFORD

Phil Tombs turned a corner and there was his auntie's house, third in the row. There were people, and there was young Arthur Griffin yelling and yelling 'E's coming! Phil Tombs is coming!' and then he saw on the bit of demolition right opposite what looked like hearses, only he saw they were two long black cars. *Prestige*, he said to himself, *without a hint of ostentation*. And he felt sudden terrible fear and a terrible excitement and then there was a blinding flash right in his face because somebody, a press photographer it must be, had taken his photograph.

### *Chapter Three*

HIS first thought had been to clock the chap with the camera for his doing that without a by-your-leave. And his second was why he put on jeans when he had all those good clothes he'd look well in? But he hadn't time for much thinking. For here was this crowd of neighbours, old folks mostly, crowding round and clapping and raising a ragged sort of cheer. And the kids, the Griffins and that lot, had started up with 'Happy Birthday to You', and it was all noisy and confused and friendly enough in the dusk when suddenly there was a flare of light and he saw in a dazzled way a fellow up on the roof of a van with something trained on him like it might be a gun, but of course it was a telly camera. Like a flash he imagined his own face, surprised and scared and silly, as it would flicker later that night on all the bleeding telly-boxes in England. And he thought he was trying quick to give his head this little jerk that got the curl down over his forehead. But in fact what he'd done was to swing round and let England and all have nothing but the rump of him. Instantly he felt chaps patting him on the back, and there was another cheer that he knew, this time, was an organized one for the benefit of the mikes. And his auntie's house was straight in front of him, two up and two down, shabby and condemned and lingering, and now blazing and blazing, it seemed, in all this light hurled at it. He had a glimpse of the geraniums he did for auntie in the

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window-box looking queer. It was some sort of fluorescent lighting that played tricks with colour, he thought. And then he was over the door-step – the only hearthstoned one in the street – and inside the house and expecting he didn't know what.

What did they do – supposing you'd been fool enough not to put a cross in the place saying *No Publicity* – in a matter of £20,000 or thereabouts? His head was in a whirl and his orders of magnitude not working this time and it would have been no surprise if he'd found they'd brought over Gracie Fields from the Isle of Capri. But there were only two old men and two young ones – that and his auntie, sitting behind the corner of the dresser and crying into her apron.

The two old men were different types. One was all Van Heusen and short black jacket and striped pants like he might be a top-class family solicitor in an Ealing comedy, and it was plain he meant to take the floor. The other old man was older and you might say remote; he was in oldish no sort of clothes that you could tell were expensive and a striped tie. The two young men weren't different; they were the same one as the other: ordinary cleverdicks you could see, and each of them had a pencil and a scribbling pad. Phil didn't like the look of them. So he thought he'd better start.

'See here,' he said all tough, 'what's this, anyway? I didn't ask for it, did I? You're upsetting my aunt.'

As soon as he began to speak, the young chaps' pencils began to move across their reporters' notebooks. Phil turned on them.

'Do you mind?' he said, and got a challenge into it that stopped them dead. There was a bit of silence like what comes before a ruck in a pub. And at that his auntie looked up from her apron. Years with that husband of hers had taught her to chip in quick when it looked like being a row.

'Oh, our Phil,' she cried – and it might have been over something despairing – 'they say you've won the pools, and me never knowing you did them!'

'Of course I do the pools,' Phil said. He heard his own voice almost as if it was angry. But it was only that all this

was bewildering, with none of the feelings you'd guessed at when you'd sometimes thought of it happening. 'I done the pools for years.'

'Just so.' It was the black-jacketed man that came forward on this. 'Very happy indeed to meet you, Mr Tombs.' He held out a fat white hand that Phil found himself shaking. And at this there was another flash in his face, so he knew the photographer must have slipped in behind him. His auntie gave a scream, but the black-jacketed man went on with what might have been a speech. 'It's always a pleasure, Mr Tombs, to meet our clients in a personal way. And above all, I need hardly say, to make the acquaintance of a regular investor in such happy circumstances as these. And it is regular investment, mark you' – and at this the black-jacketed man glanced at the young cleverdicks, so that they took heart and began scribbling again – 'that is likely to be crowned with such well-deserved success as we are witnessing now.' The black-jacketed man paused and looked in a pury sort of way past Phil's left ear, so that Phil turned and saw that somebody had managed to push up the window from the outside, not without cracking one of the panes in its rotting sash, and thrust in the telly camera. His bewilderment grew, and he felt a lot of senseless-fright, and in one small clear area in his head he was aware of resentment because of being called an investor. Bad language, that was – like calling a bookie a Turf Accountant or the never-never Lifetime Credit.

'Very pleased, I'm sure.'

It was with dismay that Phil heard himself mumble this. The feeling was rather shameful, like being a beaten man in an apprentices' scrap.

'And now, I think, we might have the formal occasion.' The black-jacketed man looked round the little room. 'If Mr Prendick is ready, that is.'

'Perhaps we ought to say if Mrs Tombs and her nephew are ready.' The other old chap, Prendick he must be, said this in an ironical way, like it was a snub polished as smooth as a pebble to his understrapper – who took it with a dignified smile, that being what he was paid for. Then this Prendick got

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off the kitchen chair he'd been sitting in as if it was a fauteuil and walked over to Phil's auntie. He had about two yards to go in the crowded space, but he made it like it was a leisured stroll in the drawing-room of Buckingham Palace.

'Now, Mrs Tombs,' he said, 'would you care to come into this photograph with your nephew? They seem to think that you and I should both be in it. In fact, I suppose I must be handing over the cheque.'

'And with Mrs Tombs looking over Mr Tombs's shoulder' Black-jacket was now fussing around, and more men were crowding into the room. A couple of them were halfway up the staircase that rose from within a yard of the street door, and Phil thought he could hear the rotten treads crumbling beneath them and the crazy banister cracking as they hauled some of their equipment into position. There was a lot of noise from outside now. The whole district must be gathered in the narrow street.

'Is it for the papers?' Phil's auntie asked this in a quavering voice, so that you'd never have guessed how she could still give it to you if she wanted to.

'For the papers, certainly' Mr Prendick was easy and soothing. 'If you have no objection, that is. And it gives a lot of pleasure, don't you agree? I always think people like the pictures in the papers. It's nice to see what's going on in the world. And of course this is rather a red-letter day for your lad. And what a nice young fellow he is.'

'We were a mardy one as a nipper, our Phil. But I wouldn't saw owt against him now. Steady work and steady money – that's 'is motto. And he'll make as good a husband as it's given to a man to be – which don't say much, as far as my experience goes.'

The cleverdicks were scribbling again. And, for all Phil knew, the telly might be working and the old woman's cackle tumbling into every front kitchen in Britain. He scowled fiercely, and immediately saw that it was on himself that the bleeding thing was trained at the moment. He was in for this, and it was just no good getting ratty. He looked at the cleverdicks and told himself he needn't give a sod for them. He

could offer them that much money that they'd grovel for it or perform tricks like a dog.

'But not in my apron, love. I won't have my photo taken in my apron – not with Phil famous.'

'I'm afraid I'm not very properly dressed myself.' Prendick was helping Phil's auntie to her feet and Phil found himself disliking the man for having got round her like this, although her calling him 'love' was no more than her normal Yorkshire way with anyone she didn't hate the guts of. 'But we certainly won't hurry you,' Prendick was going on. 'All these people are here to behave entirely as you wish Badger' – and Prendick turned to Black-jacket – 'clear these men off that staircase at once. Mrs Tombs wants to go and tidy up.'

There was more scurrying, and Phil's auntie was escorted to the stair-foot by Prendick as if she was Marilyn Monroe attending a premiere. At the same moment the street door opened, and Phil had a glimpse of a copper now keeping guard on it outside. But a girl was being allowed to come in. And Phil had never seen such a girl.

She was in a plain tailor-made and a little plain felt hat and there was a faint touch of lipstick to her lips and nothing else. She had a figure that did something to him at once in an immaterial kind of way, and it seemed crazy that he should so much as notice her, considering what he had on his plate. Yet here he was, having to lock his knees to prevent them behaving funny, and he saw in a flash that his auntie's door had opened on this girl like one of those bits in a film that gets you because it's a symbol. She was a quintessence, that was the word, of the whole brave new world that this might or might not be leading to. And then in a second it was all over.

'Oh, Jean – there you are.' Prendick was smiling at the girl in his charming elderly way. 'Be frightfully clever, my dear, and find a telephone, and let them know we'll be at least half an hour late for dinner.'

'We'll certainly be that.' The girl called Jean, who must be this Prendick's secretary, nodded to him briskly like an equal. She gave a look round the whole set-up, including a glance

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at Phil that made him feel he was an easy sum she'd worked out quick and dropped into a filing cabinet. 'I'll telephone from the pub at the corner. And then wait in the car.'

She was gone. If she'd walked out taking that whole £20,000 with her Phil Tombs couldn't have felt more deprived.

And now Prendick was coming at him – crossing the jaspé lino Phil had put down for auntie at Christmas with his air of moving over acres of gracious living. 'I hope,' he murmured, 'you don't mind all this, Tombs? It won't last long.'

Phil had never had 'Tombs' said to him in that tone before. 'Tombs' had always sounded as if it was made to go with 'Look lively, can't you?' or 'Take that lot over to the tool room, d'you hear?' He naturally expected 'Mr Tombs' on formal occasions – and it was 'Mr Tombs' he'd been getting from Badger the Black-jacket. But the nature of Prendick's 'Tombs' of course he picked up at once. It was clubman nattering to clubman, or Eton nodding to Harrow during the cricket match. And how to react, Phil didn't know at all. He wasn't going to be condescended to, he wasn't. And he felt that this pass of Prendick's wasn't quite right. A real aristocrat – you might put it this way – would have murmured every one of these words except just that 'Tombs'. For your name, spoken like that, presumes something that ten minutes' acquaintance just can't have created. That was it.

'I can take it,' Phil said. 'Fair's fair. You get the publicity, and I get the cheque.'

'Ah, yes – the cheque.' Prendick, for all his casual air, was looking thoughtfully at Phil. I'm being sized up, Phil thought. And, well, he thought, that too is fair enough in a way. It's probably one of their anxious moments. They hand out big money like this often enough. And what do people do with it? Prendick and his crowd must be anxious that people don't do anything too silly until a bit of time's passed, so that the pools and whatever people *do* do don't stick out too plainly as cause and effect. That's it, too.

'At least you're not a fool,' Prendick said.

Phil was startled. He had a notion the man had read his

mind. And he had a notion too that suddenly the man had said something spontaneous and honest. So he respected Prendick more. Which didn't mean he liked him.

'Thanks a lot,' he said.

'The fact is, you know, that it's rather a devilish lot of money.'

'I can count, can't I?' Phil said.

'And you can count on us, if I may say so. Badger over there will presently be telling you about our advisory service. Investment, and so forth. We try to make a good show of it. Have it run by very decent chaps. And they'll meet your convenience, as Badger would say, to talk about things at any time.'

'Thanks again. But all I want is that all these people should blow. TV and Jesus knows what! A bloody balls-up, I call it.'

Prendick looked at him seriously. 'Just say blow,' he said, 'and I'll clear them out instantly.'

'Let them be,' Phil felt that he was behaving very badly. His language was never refined. He kept right out of it anything you might call the Secret Life of Philip Tombs. Still, he didn't often pitch words about like that. It was a queer way to behave when on the threshold of a fortune. But he resented these people. He resented their power to sweep up hundreds of thousands of shillings from all over England and tumble them into anybody's lap. Crazy of him, perhaps. But, at the moment, he had a feeling like that. 'Let them have their fun,' he said. 'You hand me the cheque. I grin at the cameras like I'm feeling kind of lucky. And auntie cries into her only handkerchief.'

'Then let's get it over,' Prendick smiled his consciously sensitive smile. 'But about that advisory service. If you don't feel like contacting my people, I'll be delighted if at any time you contact me direct. Write to the firm, but put "Attention C.D." on the envelope. It's a kind of code that will bring your letter straight to my desk.'

Chairman of Directors, Phil thought. Aloud, he said:

'Ta. I can write. They taught me.'

Prendick smiled as if this was a nice joke said in a friendly way.

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'Here's your aunt,' he said. 'So let's get on with it. The admirable Badger will stage-manage us.'

And in half an hour it was all over. They'd gone. The vans and the two big black limousines were gone from the little street. Even the crowd was gone, and nobody came to the door. Phil was surprised at that. But none of his pals lived down here – and his auntie didn't do much among the neighbours. Only the Griffins and some other kids were still about. But they must have thought Phil had fetched that copper, for they were hostile now. Two or three times they came dashing up to the window, jeering and running off again, and once they threw an old cabbage stalk into the room. It was a good thing it was a mild early summer night. Because that window wasn't going to shut again, not without a major repair to it. The TV crowd had wrecked it. They'd wrecked auntie's geraniums in the window box. And that banister had gone all right. There was a tear in the lino. The blue glass mug saying 'My Dear Girl' had been swept off the mantelpiece so he'd had to kick the bits into the hearth. They'd made the whole place a shambles. And of course it didn't matter, they thought, because they'd left behind them all the lolly in the world.

Phil went into the back kitchen and made his auntie a Bengers. He got himself out an ale. He wondered if he was mental, not normal, because his mood didn't seem to be right. He went back and sat with auntie. He saw, as she sipped the Bengers, that a lot of her mind was coming back to her, the way it sometimes did. Perhaps she'd be gay about it. But she wasn't.

'It's a power of money, is it?' she asked. Her tone put him on the defensive.

'Yes, it's a bleeding lot.' He hadn't looked at the cheque to see what were the odd pounds. 'But it don't mean a thing.'

'Fine day, it doesn't.'

'Well, it means you can take the weight off your feet, auntie, from now on. I can fix that. Get out to one of the estates, and have a girl in.'

'A girl in! At my age? You're mental, you are.'



'That's what I'm thinking. I'm mental. But I expect it's just the shock.'

'Shock! If you're not mental, you're mardy, Phil Tombs.'

'That's what you told them, isn't it?'

'I was brought up hard, and I was brought up respectable. I know what money is. Ten bob too little – which is what it was with us, regular – and it's bellies going wrong on too much potato and too much bread. Ten bob too much and it's gin instead of the beer, and then where are you. The root of all evil, money is. That's in the Book.'

'I don't believe in the Book.'

'Well, you believe in books all right. Got a cupboard of them, as I know very well. I hope they've put some sense in your head, our Phil. For you'll need it.'

He wanted to tell her to shut her gob. Instead, he got her out some arrowroot biscuits.

'I haven't got my teeth,' she said.

'Dunk them.'

She dunked a biscuit in the Bengers and let her chaps work on it.

'You're a good lad,' she said. 'That's why I'm telling you. You always did take a telling. But you'll have to take it from those gentlemen now.'

'Bugger those gentlemen,' he said violently. 'I can manage by myself, can't I?'

'It's vanity that's like to get you, our Phil. Look at all them clothes upstairs. There's a hundred pound in them, if there's a penny.'

'It's right to be well dressed. But I don't give a sod for them really, I don't.'

'And that Beryl,' she said, her mind wandering about a bit. 'Is she fit to have money like that?'

'You leave Beryl alone.'

'Leave her alone? It's more than you've done, ain't it? Don't think I don't know. What are young people coming to? that's what I ask.'

'It's what they asked when you were a kid too, I expect. And Beryl's all right. She don't want money.'

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'So much the worse for her. When a man's got money, he starts going after them that will take it quick. Haven't I seen it? Haven't I seen lads get a packet on compensation after something that hasn't even hurt them, and leave some decent girl and be off up to London with their head full of the strippers and dirt like that? I've seen it, I tell you.'

'Leave off,' Phil said. 'I haven't got a bit on compensation. I'm not planning a spree. I've got big money and I've got to think big.'

'What keeps a working man respectable is having to count his pints. That's what I say.'

He stood up and drained his pot. Her mind would go on round in a circle and always she'd be attacking him. That was because she liked him always speaking her fair. It was her great luxury, having him sulky perhaps and going his own way, but never casting a bad word at her. And of course, going on lodging with her. What she'd do if she didn't do house for him he didn't know. Although often now it was him that did house for her. His grand-auntie, she was really, and getting on. She's still almost clean here, he thought. But what will she be in a Sunset Home? He felt very glum.

It still wasn't late. But he got her up the stairs and then he tidied round. He shoved the lid of the copper between the broken window sashes. He sat down for a bit and felt he was clean shagged. This Peter Sharples and the lark in the Pompadour. It seemed a hundred years. And that girl.

He went up to his room, thinking perhaps he'd have his record-player. His auntie never minded that, and in the street it was all right until the Radio Luxemburg close-down. He put on one of his classicals. But somehow it worried him. He unlocked the cupboard on the books his auntie was jealous of. You couldn't say they were in any sort of order. Dennis Wheatley, The Communist Manifesto. Hemingway. What Has Religion Done for Mankind? The Decameron. Essays in Criticism Second Series by Matthew Arnold off a barrow. The Book of the Thousand and One Nights. Tom Jones. Teach Yourself Damn All in Umpteen Volumes. The Mickey Spil-

lane he'd had off a boozed-up Yank. Pressing Problems of the Closing Age by Christabel Pankhurst. All Dickens given away by a newspaper back when his old man was a kid. Roderick Random. The Mysterious Universe. Love Play in Marriage by a Physician. Bevis. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Father and Son. Typee.

Bevis was the best and then Typee, and the man on Love Play couldn't ever have tried. They weren't all he'd read, but he had no illusions. You couldn't exactly call me educated he said to himself, and grinned into the rather bigger looking-glass he'd bought a week ago in the open-air market. But here I am, and the world's suddenly become what they call my oyster.

He emptied his pockets, and his clocking-in card was like something in a museum. He opened the window and tossed the newspaper in an untidy sprawl into the yard. He stamped himself out of his jeans and almost threw them out too. He stripped. And then he got in front of the mirror again.

His shoulders were in the right ratio to his hips and his belly was a straight line and there wasn't much doubt about what one of those books called his genital status. It was true he was a bit spotty, and his body was the colour of something pitiful ripped out of its shell. But that could be put right. And, such as he was, he was looking at himself dead straight in the glass. Still naked, he went over to the window and stuck his head and shoulders out. You'll be sticking your neck out all right, he thought. There was one of their college bells going but he didn't give a sod. He brought out the Camels he'd forgotten about, thinking he'd have a drag. But then he forgot, and just went on staring out of the window till it grew chilly. After that he got into his nylon pyjamas. And after that he thought to take a look at this cheque.

He looked for quite some time and it was as if great chords were sounding. His orders of magnitude had been all wrong. Of course Chairman-of-Directors Prendick and that lot would never have created like that over a mere twenty thousand. The cheque must be one of the very biggest ever. It said just 'under a quarter of a million pounds.

## *Chapter Four*

A COUPLE of kippers was what his auntie had for Phil next morning. It was what he always liked on Saturday when on the five-day week. But he'd only worked down one side of the first when there came a bang on the door and the postman handed in a wad of stuff tied up in string.

'More coming in the van, mate,' he said sardonic, and slammed the door behind him. An old-fashioned socialist, he was, that would sometimes spend half an hour chinning about Opiates for the Workers, and Wage Serfs chained to Bread and Circuses. So it was clear how he felt. But it's plum cake and all Bertram Mills this time, Phil thought. And he cut the string and began sorting the things over. His auntie had taken one look and gone into the back kitchen. It was the beginning of the unknown for her, and she didn't like it.

He didn't much like it himself by the time he'd got some way through, although there was one about Gentlefolk in Reduced Circumstances that rather took his fancy. He might ask the postman about that one; it was a new light on the Class War, it seemed to Phil. Some were just circulars, and he thought poorly of the blokes who'd hurried hopefully along to the pillar-box with *them*. But most were letters, slap-up personal and with a threepenny stamp. Smart staff-work there, he had to admit, considering that his address could only have been in the late-night finals. And if this lot was only a sample of what was coming to him later in the day you'd be surprised to know how many Helping Hands England had to hold out to you. There was an M.A. Cantab. that would read with him, 'formally or informally', in Current Affairs, General Literature and recent books affording a view of the Structure of Modern Society. There was a clinic who would cure him of inebriety – which wasn't a bad shot in the dark, considering how he might well have been behaving last night up to closing time. There was a Titled Lady (anonymous in the first instance) who had Daughters. He could hardly believe that one – but there it was,

*complete with a cornet*, or was it a coronet, on the envelope. *He'd have the daughters all inside of a week, he told himself* cheerfully, and finish up with the old trout herself by way of payment. Then he tore up that one quick and opened one from a lady, untitled, dying of cancer. There were Investment Consultants, as you might well expect. There was a Villa going on the Riviera. There was one from an accommodation address about a man who'd like to tour the Continent with him and who enclosed a photo. It was a queer photo, and he laughed at it before stuffing it in the stove out of his auntie's way – him not being that way inclined. But there was another with other photos that shook him. Sex rearing its Ugly Head, he told himself – but his own head swam in a way he didn't fancy at eight o'clock in the morning, and he burned all that too. Then he discovered there wasn't anything else that seemed improper, which was slightly disappointing. So he ate his second kipper soberly, reflecting that his auntie wasn't far wrong about what a young chap might be prompted to, going round with sudden money. He thought he'd better think about Beryl. And then he thought about that girl last night.

Her name was Jean and she must be about his own age. Except that she worked for Prendick, he didn't know another thing about her. Or only, that was to say, that she behaved in a special way inside his head, not letting herself be treated there like any ordinary desirable girl had to let herself be. That was a queer way of putting it, but it was something he couldn't get clearer. He couldn't picture her taking off so much as a glove or a shoe. He couldn't picture himself just touching her hand with his hand. For a minute he wondered if it was perhaps because she wasn't normal, perhaps one of the ones you read about in some of the psychological books. But almost straight away he knew that to be nonsense, and he might have got round to putting some simple name to the state of his case – being **no** fool, as Prendick had said – when his reflections were broken into by a knock at the street door.

What made him think quick, of course, was that nobody walked straight in. It was one of the things his auntie couldn't get over, the way they behaved down here. The rent-collector

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and the man who took the shillings out of the gas-meter walked in regular without a knock, and anybody else knocked with one hand and turned the handle with the other. So here was a stranger, and it didn't take much telling what sort of stranger he would be. It was only common sense that a lot of the kind of people who'd sent all these letters and circulars should try their luck in person. Phil didn't know how he'd manage if in M A Cantab came in or for that matter a titled lady with her daughters behind her. And he wasn't not this morning going to stop and find out. So he was into the back kitchen and with the door shut in a jiffy. He made a grab at the shelf where his auntie kept the housekeeping money.

*'I'm taking ten bob,' he called while she stared at him. 'There's someone at the door. Perhaps it's your Health Visitor.' And he slipped into the yard and was over the fence before she could reply.*

It was a lovely day – a day so lovely you could tell it before you were past the lavatory and the coal-place. Then he was over in what old Ma Huggins called her garden – and fair enough since it was chock-full of annuals although no bigger than a snot-rag. He went through where there had been a wooden gate before some realist took it for kindling and then he thought he'd nip round and take a quick look down the street.

His auntie had answered the door, he saw, and whoever it was had gone inside. But that didn't leave the place deserted again, not by any means. There were two men in hats, the kind that might want to be selling you insurance, who walked straight past his nose. They didn't see him because they were looking at the numbers on the doors, and when they weren't doing that they were looking at each other like they might be two dogs approaching the same bone. And from the other direction was coming another man in a hat, but more the kind that might be offering you a two-hundred-per-cent-automatic washing-machine for ten nicker down. But that wasn't the lot, because there was a car in bottom gear that looked to be stopping any moment. And, to crown all, what if there wasn't a chap from the Salvation Army, clutching a collecting-box

and flipping across the street on feet as flat as yesterday's pale ale. Phil hurried away quick.

When he'd walked a couple of streets he stopped dead the way he sometimes did. He was in flight, there wasn't another word for it, and what he was in flight from was all he knew. But who wouldn't – he asked himself, rallying – get away from this when the going was good? *Really* away. Not just from St Ebbe's to their bleeding Dickey-bird Leys, from the machine shops to telecommunications via the 'Tec, from his auntie to – well, to Beryl and kids and a three-wheeler and a fortnight in August with Billy Butlin. *Really away*. You've nothing to do, he told himself, but buy your ticket and take your seat. They do the rest.

He was in one of the streets that had pretty well had it. One side was down, and brick-dust coated everything left on the other. The doors were all chalked on by the kids – nothing rude, but just rubbish about Elvis and the like, and on a window-pane thick with grime some finger had scrawled 'I love Derek by Wendy'. You take kids and keep them nine years in some apology for a school, and then they go out and find a surface sufficiently mucky for writing 'I love Derek by Wendy'. But hadn't he done it himself? Let's hope, he thought, that I love Wendy by Derek. Then perhaps they'll live happy ever after.

He'd worked round and was in Paradise Street when he heard a shout.

'Hi'ya, Phil!'

'Hi'ya!' he called back cheerfully. It was the gang. It was Fred Prescott and Arthur Coutts, both in Pressed Steel, and George Pratley that had gone to Radiators some time back. They'd all four been neighbours as kids, and they still kept together quite a bit – even although they all had girls now, which made things rather different naturally. A month ago Arthur Coutts had been thinking he'd have to get married. Only it had passed off.

'How you keeping, Phil?'

'Not too badly, Fred. Yourself?'

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These were rather elderly greetings. They indicated what you might call constraint. Phil saw that they knew all right. They were probably on their way to find him. Now they stood round him in a half circle, grinning and excited, see-saw between hostile and friendly, confronted with the unknown. If Fred Prescott also looked a bit sheepish it was perhaps because his girl had got the upper hand of him, as all could see, and made him quit that Duck's Behind for a straight sleeking back with oil. George Pratley had his Tony Curtis still. Perhaps his girl liked it – although, Phil thought, it was as common as Andy Capp. As for Artie Coutts, you never noticed his hair – or anything about him except his big round glasses. Artie was quiet and learned, a public-library, evening-classes type. It was funny he fitted in so well. And it was funny it would be Artie who'd find himself thinking he'd got his girl in trouble. Absent-minded, of course.

'How's it feel, Phil?'

Fred's voice was challenging. He had to assert himself, having been got down like that by a skirt. But the question was crucial. It would set a tone, you might say.

'It's a comedy,' Phil thought he'd try something airy. 'Prime Minister on the blower saying won't I join his Cabinet. Knock on the street door and it's the Governor of the Bank of England.'

There was a moment's silence that told of a bit of a misfire. Then, because their intentions were good, there was boisterous laughter.

'Is it all that-much they say it is?' George Pratley asked.

'I don't know what they say it is. But they'll have got it about right, I expect.' This time, Phil looked at his friends without any thought of calculating an effect. 'It's nearly a quarter of a million nicker. And it's in my pocket now.'

There was another silence, but this time as if for serious thought. It surprised Phil that none of them asked to be let have a look at the cheque. And he'd almost made as if to produce it. So he quickly thrust his hands carelessly in the trouser-pockets of what was his second-best suit.

'Christ, what a day,' he said.



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'Last of the season,' Fred said with some awkwardness. 'And the United's playing Away. Think I'll fish.'

'Nice by the water now,' Artie said. 'Let's go by the canal.'

'Got a bet for my dad,' George said, 'has to go in down Park End Street. All go that way.'

'Oky-doke,' Phil said. He felt it was for him to respond quick. 'I want a breath of air. Helps thinking.'

This time the silence was sympathetic. You must back up a man who's got himself so that he has to think. George produced a packet of fags and they all had a drag. They strolled through the morning sunshine, whistling, straying, giving a kick at an old match-box – anything. This part of Oxford you could own as you walked. There were only a few women with baskets, hurrying along, the way women do, with the lion's share of yesterday's pay-packet in their bags.

Artie Coutts fell behind with Phil.

'It seems a question,' he said, 'of 'ow to set up as yer own boss. That's the solid thing.'

Artie had obviously been giving the problem thought. Phil, as a matter of fact, had some hopes of Artie. Artie wasn't like Phil, loudly uneducated and swearing he never opened a book. He was frankly and shamelessly well informed. Of course it got him into trouble at times, particularly when he turned out a bit wrong. But Artie didn't seem to mind.

'That's it,' Phil said soberly. 'No good just joining the idle rich.'

Artie nodded approvingly.

'You can't,' he said. 'Not *join* them. Only be born into them, the bleeders.'

'That's right, man,' Phil spoke with all proper conviction. But he had glanced up at small white clouds in a blue sky, and had taken a deep breath of the soft air of this heady month, and suddenly he wasn't all that certain that he couldn't do with a bit of being idle rich. Hazy pictures out of films, out of books by Dornford Yates – cheap stuff but enticing – suggested places with ten times this amount of sun, suggested white sails on calm seas, swimming pools alive with lovely girls, bronzed athletic bodies rejoicing in their skill at no end of sports and games.

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'Eating and drinking and screwing,' Artie was saying sombrelly. 'Screwing and drinking and eating Rot a man in no time'

'Unless born to it,' Phil said, a bit ironic

'But about being yer own boss, you see,' Artie went on, 'it's a matter of the scale being the difficulty, if you follow me'

'Ah,' Phil said, 'orders of magnitude'

'Perhaps that' Artie looked disconcerted for a moment. 'What I mean is, man, that you with yer head screwed on right could start in as yer own boss any day Not, of course, that yer age wouldn't be against it Folk would think to take advantage, like'

'I'd learn them,' Phil offered toughly

'But it would have to be business in a small way – or say a *middling* small way' Artie had added this at a truculent look from the new capitalist 'Just as a matter of technique and experience, you see Of course you could start some great big fmg with yer quarter million I don't know just 'ow big a fmg you couldn't start on that Artie allowed a small pause for awe 'But you'd 'ave to 'ave managers and the like that knew so much more about it than you did that it wouldn't be like being yer own boss, at all' Artie Coutts stopped for a moment on this clear statement 'And then you wouldn't – he rather unexpectedly went on – 'ave much notion of how honest you'd 'ave to be'

'What d'you mean?' Phil demanded wrathfully 'Aren't I honest?'

'No worker's honest, man And no boss is honest either But they're dishonest in different ways And if the one way gets mixed up with the other, then yer as good as inside Very suitably, Artie jerked a thumb over his right shoulder in the direction of Oxford gaol 'Declassy, you'd be,' he said 'And once a man's declassy he 'as to mind his step'

Phil was silent for a moment He marked down a loose pebble not far off his path, and swerved aside to kick it viciously past Fred and George still strolling ahead

'What d'you recommend then, Artie? I been trying to think. But it's not easy.'

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'Somefing small for a start.' Artie was at once firm and vague. 'You must learn to walk before you can run, man. And look before you leap.'

Phil was silent again. He didn't find this Wayside Pulpit stuff encouraging, and his hopes of Artie Coutts faded. He doubted whether Artie had much command of what they called the spirit of enterprise. And Phil was pretty clear he needed that. This money hadn't come to him through caution and thrift and prudence and foresight and all that. It had come to him by luck, and because for some months he'd been blowing several shillings a week in a way any intelligent chap would have told him was pure down-the-drain. He oughtn't to behave with it as if it was all a monument to the Industrious Poor and Samuel Smiles and Self-Help. But they were in Park End Street now, and it was with a sense of remembering something that he suddenly noticed the post office there.

'Half a jiff,' he called out to the two in front. 'I got to buy a P.O.' He dived in, fished out his auntie's ten shilling note, and bought the P.O. and a stamped envelope. He picked up the pen on the counter and hastily scrawled *Pompadour Caff, George Street*. There was no time for good spelling, and he was out again in a minute and stuffing the thing into the pillar box.

'Doing the pools, Phil?' George Pratley asked with a great flash of wit.

'Pools is a mug's game.' Phil was not to be outdone. 'Something I owed a chap from when I picked up a crate from the beer-off last week.'

They were all liars. And Phil would have told any size lie rather than admit to this morbidly honest act to which a sudden memory of the undergrad Peter Sharples had prompted him. He could see that being moneyed required a new attitude in some matters. But it didn't, thank goodness, prevent his thinking up a good thumping lie for this old crowd.

'Two crates it was,' he said.

## *Chapter Five*

GEORGE PRATLEY placed his old man's bet, and then they went round by Hythe Bridge Street and took the canal. Phil was for walking with George now. George was the one that never had a chip on his shoulder. He'd be completely friendly still, even if he wasn't that bright that he was likely to have anything very useful to suggest. But Artie hung on to Phil, so they went forward as before. Presently, Phil knew, they'd all stop and sit down and chuck stones in the water and have a bit of chinning and scuffle and then lie soaking up this sunshine as it got warmer. You have to stand at a bleeding lathe five days of the week to know it's heaven just doing that.

'Taxation's very bad,' Artie said.

'PAYE?'

'Yer through with that, man. Face it. Yer never going to be 'anded a pay-packet again. Nothing but dividends and bonus issues. Of course the bonus issues are pretty good.' Artie said this a shade reluctantly. 'But it's the Supertax gets you,' he added brightening.

'Supertax - *me*?' Phil was honestly astonished. It would never have come into his head.

'That and yer income-tax'll be sixteen an' frippence in the pound at the top, you'll see, you will.'

'Garn!' Phil said incredulously.

'Unless you start an 'orspital or somefing. Or go in for farming. A lot of them does that.'

'I don't want any hospital. I'm healthy. And what would I be doing farming - mucking around in pigs' shit and all? Come off it.'

'It's an occupation for a gentleman, like.' Arthur Coutts was now openly mocking. 'Goes with 'untin' and shootin' and being the ruddy ol' lord of the manor. Sir Philip Tombs of Liberty 'All in the County of Snobshire.'

'You're helpful,' Phil said, sarky but forbearing.

'You could emigrate, mind you.' Artie, apparently repentant,

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was returning to earnest thought on his friend's problem. 'There's countries that 'aven't the same advanced trends in social legislation wot we've got 'ere '

'Say it simple,' Phil said. He had more words than Artie, if Artie only knew. This thought put him in good humour again.

'There's famous authors lives in Ostrailyer. Sydney 'as some very 'igh-class suburbs, they say. And there's a sort of fishin' and shootin' all rolled into one. You go arter whales and sharks and the like with 'arpoons '

Moby Dick, Phil thought. The Old Man and the Sea. He said

'Nerts for Australia '

'And there's parts of Africa that's much better. That is, from this ere niscal point of view. Taxes ain't nuffin, 'cos yer whack all the labour out of the blacks '

'Nerts for Africa. With knobs on '

'But the money's not everyfink, Phil. There's clarse. Yer got to consider that '

'Hell there's class ' Phil said. He was thinking that Artie Coutts had what you might call a dead common accent. Really that. It came from being born somewhere in South London. His words weren't rich in his mouth, like the others' words were. They were all chewed away.

'There's nowhere such a thing as a clarseless society. Not yet. Not in Soviet Russia, any more than 'ere. I 'ave a mate made somefing on Ernie, almost same as you, last year. 'E went to Russia and drove all around. Clarse everywhere, 'e said. Money too, mind you. First night, they put 'im in a big hotel, and it corst 'im pretty well 'is pants. But that worn't all. Bosses going about looking like don't you touch-me. Wearing 'ats '

'So what? I'm not going to Russia '

'But then there's the Open Society. That's what you want. Means plenty of opportunity to use yer capital. Build up an affair like Woolworth's, if you like, and be 'irin' and firin' blokes by the thousand, just as yer fancy takes you. But no 'igh 'at clarse feelin' against you just 'cos yer a parvenoo '

'Sounds like having it both ways, that does. Where d'you say this Open Society happens, Artie?'

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'Where?' The well-informed Artie oddly faltered. 'Dunno,' he said vaguely. 'I'd 'ave to look it up. Queer about them bleedin' swans.'

Phil looked at the swans. What was queer about them was the way they went after each other up and down the canal. They didn't swim and they didn't fly. They flapped and paddled half-and-half, and looked as if they were putting a lot of energy into not managing very much. Something had been done to their wings, he supposed, so that they'd remain around for ornamental purposes. It didn't look comfortable. Neither one thing nor the other. Perhaps that was the plain English for what Artie called being declassy.

The others had sat down. A bit farther back they might have sat down on grass and looked across the canal at this park or garden, Worcester College's was it? with an old grey stone building far back through the trees and a lake and a cricket field and some idle chaps lying around. But they marched past all that, rolling slightly on their hips and sometimes pivoting on a heel in a kind of routine make-believe as if they were tripping each other up, since it was the idea when they got together to behave as if they were sixteen-year-olds still. Now they sat down on what was mostly gritting ashes but they didn't mind that. And on the other side of the canal there was a wharf with great stacks of red tiles and hundreds and hundreds of raw red chimney-pots. It was a nice view and for a time they all four sat idle, just chucking a bit of grit into the water or reaching about for a twig to chew or fetching out a comb and passing it the right way through their hair. Then Phil got out his Camels and they lit up. He lay back with his knees up and an arm under his head, looking at the sky that was growing bluer and feeling the sun that was growing warmer it seemed every minute. And George Pratley lay beside him, sprawled on his belly and with his head on his wrists, so that he was murmuring into Phil's ear.

'Christ you'll have a lovely time,' George murmured happily. 'Good old bleeding Phil.'

'What sort of lovely time?'

'Oh, I dunno.' George contrived to yawn without either rais-

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ing his head or letting the cigarette fall from his lips. 'Have whatever you fancy. It's a comedy, man, like you said.'

'Women?'

'Goes without saying, man. All the new season's models. Straight off the conveyor belt and guaranteed in perfect mechanical order.'

'I never bought a woman yet. Shan't begin now.'

'Garn!' George's heavy incredulity was a polite convention. Phil turned his head and they grinned at each other – each out of the same sex experience, not what would be approved by a parson, but licensed, codified and respectable within their world. 'Not that you need always be thinking of skirts,' George went on. 'Poor-man's occupation, that is. With money you can do things. Mount Everest. North Pole.' He spat away the butt of his cigarette. 'What about being the first man on the moon? Cut in on the Ruskies.'

It was funny that it was always old George Pratley, who never opened a book, and not Artie Coutts with all his free library stuff, who had these flashes.

'Take millions and millions,' Phil said. 'A whole country like Britain can't scarcely afford that kind of thing.'

'Tain't so much money that's needed as 'nitiative, man. Piti-ful this sodding country is – staring into the telly at Quater-mass and that, and the Ruskies really doing the bleeding thing, and even the Yanks not misfiring every time. Rich amatcheur with enthusiasm might get things moving. Put British rockets on their feet, like.'

Phil turned his head. Fred Prescott and Arthur Coutts were sitting up and jawing at each other in low voices he couldn't catch. And then Fred gave Phil a quick look Phil thought odd. Of course he had to expect odd looks, this thing having happened to him. But there was something about Fred he didn't like, all the same. Perhaps it was just that girl they said had taken to running him, perhaps he was thinking of snapping out on her. But that seemed no reason for this quick look at Phil.

'Artie,' Phil called, 'what's the moon like? Not Superman stuff. Honest scientific.'

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'Day larsts a month,' Artie said. 'Then nights larst a month. Cold like you wouldn't believe.'

'Cold by day?'

'I'd 'ave to look it up But might be quite 'ot, I think Sun comes up like it might be a distillery on fire Great tongues of flame, see? You'd see it that way 'cos of their being no atmosphere to speak of That long long night, with darkness and cold you wouldn't think of, like I said Then this 'orrid sunrise P'raps nothink else Only if there was just a bit of air, kind of thawing out and blowing round in the daytime, then you might 'ave lichen and stuff, even little flowers, coming up in the 'eat and lasting from dawn to dusk Insecks, even '

'Only twelve days in the year?' George asked wonderingly

'Jes' that.' Artie was confident 'And I wouldn't arf mind a month of Sundays' He looked at Phil 'What d'you want to know about the moon for?'

'He's going there,' George said, sticking half serious to his idea.

'Setting up his country seat among the lunatics,' Fred said. 'Have his deer park in a bleeding volcano '

Phil wasn't listening He was up in outer space, weightless except that there was a small pull towards the centre of gravity in the rocket He looked out through the perspex and there was darkness and some stars - stars just as far away as when you are on earth, but from here naked and blazing And you could hear the silence, the terrifying silence out there as they moved on their courses What though in solemn silence all roll round the dark terrestrial ball Only of course they weren't rolling round anything They were stars and plunging and plunging, that was it, farther and farther away And the farther away they got the faster they got away, thrusting and thrusting and thrusting into the expanding universe He looked back - not that of course you could, but he kidded himself he did Through some sort of super telescope he looked back at earth And there was England and Oxford and his auntie's two up and two down There was Prendick going round handing out cheques to mugs There was I love Derek by Wendy. There was New Street and Gas Street



and the Primitive Methodists 1843. There was Beryl. And there, too, was the girl called Jean.

Abruptly Phil's rocket or whatever dissolved into air or ether around him. He was lying on his back beside the canal, and Fred Prescott and Artie Coutts were on their feet making perfunctory noises of farewell, having fixed up to go and do he didn't care what. But old George Pratley was still lying beside him on his stomach, idly investigating his teeth with a grass-stalk that was stiff enough for the job. George completed this dental work at leisure and then flung away the bit of grass.

'Fred' - he spoke more apologetically than accusingly - 'don't talk very nice about it. I think it's a hell of a fine thing to happen, Phil. Honest I do. To you, you know. You've got ideas, you have.'

'Ideas? Garn! I just got to settle down. Beryl and all.'

'I know you two been knocking on together.' George spoke with great care. 'Beryl's not a bad kid. But she'll be pretty dateless, won't she, as the wife of a man with hundreds of thousands of pounds?'

'It don't mean a thing.'

'Yes, it does. You got brains. Reading and all that.'

'Never hardly open a book, I don't.'

'Fine day, you don't, Phil. You could get somewhere, you could, with that money. You could go to the Varsity for a start.'

'Christ! I'd be dead before.' Phil sat up. 'I did meet a chap yesterday,' he said inconsequently. 'Nice chap from one of the colleges. Working-class parents. There's a lot of them.'

'You could do a heap of things. Go into politics.'

'That's what *he'd* do. This chap I met. If he had a lot of money, he said.' Phil lit another cigarette and chucked the packet at George. 'What was that you were saying about Beryl?'

'She wouldn't go along with you. She's limited, Beryl is.'

There was a silence. Phil had been about to say 'You leave Beryl alone.' But he had realized that honest indignation just wouldn't *be* honest - not with George.

'I couldn't ditch her,' he said. 'Not *now*.'

George stared.

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'You're not thinking what that clueless Artie was thinking, along of his girl? There's not a bit of trouble blowing up?'

'Course not. But all the same. With this money.'

George stole a cautious glance at his companion.

'First come, first served, were you?' he asked. 'Or following along?'

'Shut your bleeding gob.' Phil had got to his feet, scowling. But when he saw George Pratley's friendly concerned face he made that it had only been to get more comfortable in his trousers. 'It's a day,' he said as he sat down again.

'It's a day, man.'

They lay on their backs in a long silence, staring up at the sky from under half-closed lashes. A Yank bomber with its wicked-looking raked-back wings went over. The crew would be looking down and seeing their own shadow sweeping across the fields and villages. Phil had been to a demo and a chap had said there was always some in the air with the things on board all fused up and they flew out towards Russia in relays and if they didn't get a recall they'd fly on. That couldn't be true, it was too mad, but anyway it was getting to be like that almost. He was an orphan because his mum and dad had been killed by a bomb, a small old-fashioned bomb that smashed a house or two and blew a few people's heads off and guts out. Chicken feed.

Phil shut his eyes altogether and drew in his belly and braced his buttocks just to feel how alive he was. The roar of the plane faded to a drone, and what he heard instead was the clanking and juddering of the shunting locomotives on the railway sidings behind him. It was a good sound, the same he'd been hearing in bed almost as long as he could remember. He'd used to think of the men working through the night in the marshalling yards as a sort of patrol on the frontiers of his world of little streets and little pubs and the gas works. And now he stretched out his arms as if he was crucified, and turned the palms of his hands upward and felt the warmth of the sun on them at once. The warmth was making the canal smell a bit now, but there was some smell of growing things as well – for all that they'd chosen

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to settle down in front of nothing but tiles and chimney pots that looked far too big on the ground, and behind that was nothing but an ugly dirty church spire on some modern church. And then suddenly there was a lark, it might be straight over his head, singing so that you'd think it must do something to every soul in Oxford.

'George,' Phil said.

'Man.'

'There was a girl. There was a girl came with these people brought me the cheque.'

'So what?'

'I fell in love with her, I have.'

George Pratley sat up – which was natural with such unusual words suddenly fired at him.

'What d'you mean?'

'What I say. And your talking of Beryl made me say it. I got to be fair to Beryl. She done a lot for me, and I wouldn't do her harm.' Phil looked at George in troubled silence for a moment. 'Only I know all about her, see?'

'And about this girl?'

'I don't know a bloody thing. I don't' – Phil corrected himself oddly – 'know a thing, man.'

For a minute George Pratley said nothing. Then, although full of delicacy, he pressed on boldly.

'Looks like what I was saying,' he said.

'What d'you mean?'

'This girl you just seen yesterday may be something, or she may be nothing at all. Nothing at all, like enough. But she belongs where you can go places and see things now. And you've *got* to, Phil. You'd be no bleeding good if you didn't.'

'Shall I be any bleeding good, George, if I start off with some mean-gutted walk-out?'

George, with unusual casualness which was in fact absorbed thought, took another Camel unasked.

'D'you know,' he said, 'I been wondering once or twice lately ...' He hesitated, 'No,' he said. 'Forget it.' He looked at his wrist-watch – massively golden and on a gold bracelet you might put round a high-class female slave. 'I got to bugger off,'

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he said. 'Got a girl too, haven't I?' He grinned at Phil, all commonplace happiness again. 'Got to take her to our local flea-pit. The film of the century again. Get walking.'

### *Chapter Six*

It was close on twelve when Phil got back to Carfax. He remembered it was Saturday. He thought he'd go into the Savings Bank and get out a bit of money. And then he remembered this thing in his pocket.

Remembering made his head swim – just like those dirty photos had done at breakfast. He'd have to do something. He'd have to do something for himself, seeing he'd been so uppity about Prendick and his advisory service. Well, there were real banks here. Phil walked into one of them.

Or edged, you might say, since a man in a bowler hat was just beginning to shut up shop for the day. There were still a few customers at the counter, but on the other side of it a couple of the clerks, or tellers did they call themselves, were disengaged and playing out time fiddling with bank-notes. Phil went up to one of them, fished out his cheque and put it down on the shiny mahogany.

'I'd like something out of this, please,' he said.

It was a young chap, and he looked at Phil and then he glanced sideways at a big clock.

'Have you an account here, sir?' he asked, very civil but plainly disapproving.

'Never been in here in my life before.' Phil knew this wasn't good behaviour. But the place made him feel edgy.

'Then I'm afraid –' The young chap's glance fell on the cheque, and he frowned. Then he picked it up and had a good look at it. Phil just waited.

'Yes, I see.' The young chap was feeling it up to him to speak with careful indifference. 'Perhaps you want to open an account?'

Phil nodded.

'If that's the thing,' Phil said. Of course he knew about banks,

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more or less. But that edgy feeling was driving him to a bit of clowning

'I'm sure it can be arranged' The young chap paused importantly At the same time, he was looking round-eyed at Phil. 'Only it's usual, on the whole, for new clients to be introduced, or to provide a reference'

'D'you think so?' Phil asked 'Perhaps I'd better try across the street More go-ahead there, I'm told.'

The young chap looked alarmed

'No, no,' he said 'There's no difficulty at all Only you'd better see the manager Do you mind?' This time he looked quite appealingly at Phil And at the same time he faintly grinned But derisive was not the word Quite a friendly grin Perhaps he didn't play the pools, and wasn't feeling his own half-crowns had gone to swell that cheque Perhaps he was just a nice chap, liking to see a bit of luck around

'That's all right,' Phil said 'I'll see him But I just want to get fixed up rough and ready, you know And a bit of cash'

'Shan't be a moment By the way, Sackbutt's his name'

The young chap walked down the length of the counter and through a door at the end Phil noticed he didn't pause to murmur to any of his fellows that here was the local chap the pools had come home on Decorous Phil waited He was the only customer left now The others had all been ejected through a chink in the street door by the bowler hatted man There was a rack of pamphlets telling you how to go abroad or make a will or borrow £500 The clock ticked

'Will you come this way, Mr Tombs?'

Mr Tombs came this way Life was opening out upon him. Or was it, he wondered, closing in?

Mr Sackbutt advanced from behind an austere simple desk and shook hands in silence It was a warm firm handshake that stirred a memory in Phil When his uncle, thank goodness, had fallen down those lavatory steps in the boozier and broken his neck, the clergyman who had come about the place had given young Phil just that handshake The imparting of strength and

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consolidation seemed to be Mr Sackbutt's first thought. Then he sat Phil down in a red leather chair like it was a club, and pushed forward a silver cigarette-box.

'Thanks,' Phil said, and took a fag. He noticed that his own voice sounded smaller than usual.

Mr Sackbutt, who was elderly and grey-haired, put on a pair of heavy-rimmed glasses and picked up Phil's cheque from his desk. The way he looked at it, it might have been something pathological from Phil's inside.

'Yes,' Mr Sackbutt said gently. 'Yes.'

Phil felt very frightened. It was almost Sentence of Death stuff, like the picture.

'Would it be all right?' he asked – although he knew it was a fool question.

But, foolish or not, Mr Sackbutt weighted it.

'They certainly have the resources to honour it, Mr Tombs. They certainly have that.' He looked at Phil in a sedative and reassuring way. 'In fact, it is most unlikely that we shall have any difficulty.' He was silent for a moment, and when he spoke again it was very gravely. 'We must begin,' he said, 'by frankly acknowledging that this is a large sum of money.'

Phil felt his heart sink.

'They do sometimes do it,' he said. 'Don't they? Wonderful publicity, a dividend like that.'

'It is not, fortunately, a dividend, except in the jargon in which these people' – and Mr Sackbutt tapped the cheque – 'like to indulge. Just what it actually is, Mr Tombs, I wouldn't care to have to say. Let us adopt our own jargon, and call it a capital gain.'

'No tax?'

'Certainly no tax.' Phil saw Mr Sackbutt was concealing surprise at this elementary financial acuteness in his new client. 'Or rather the taxation comes later. Like the pain in modern dentistry or surgery.'

'Yes, of course.' Phil was alarmed at the recurrence of this clinical theme. But Mr Sackbutt, as if he saw this, suddenly stepped up the appearance of benevolent protectiveness of which his features were so capable. It made him look rather like

Let-Me-Be-Your-Father. 'But even then,' Phil said, 'I suppose there will be quite a lot. I mean, to spend.'

A faint expression of distaste warred for a moment with the wise benignity of Mr Sackbutt's expression. It was almost as if Phil had said some rude word.

'It isn't to be denied,' Mr Sackbutt said, 'that the conservation of an estate is a tricky matter in these times. Not positively *difficult*, you understand, but tricky - decidedly. As a very astute merchant banker remarked in the City the other day, the surest way to lose money at present is to leave it alone.'

'I wouldn't have thought that,' Phil said.

'For a more than moderate - um - fortune of this sort' - and Mr Sackbutt once more tapped Phil's cheque - 'a portfolio of sound Equities is undoubtedly the best thing. Even so, constant vigilance is required. I cannot conceal from you, Mr Tombs, that your choice of stockbroker - if I may assume, that is, that you have no stockbroker at present - will be of the very greatest importance.'

'A couple of people called Investment Consultants,' Phil volunteered, 'wrote to me this morning.'

'No doubt. But that is not precisely the same thing,' Mr Sackbutt looked quite anxiously at Phil. He was thinking, Phil could see, of the enormous hazards to which this simple proletarian youth must be exposed.

'And Mr Prendick,' Phil went on, 'told me he had an advisory service for big winners. How would you say that would be?'

'Entirely reputable, no doubt.' Mr Sackbutt sounded not wholly enthusiastic. 'We might discuss the wisdom of making use of it at a later time. But at present, if you have no immediate engagement, I should like to offer you a very simple sketch of the economy as I see it at present. Just that, and a preliminary word or two on the principles governing sound investment.'

'Very kind, I'm sure.' Phil was beginning to feel hungry. For a moment he had a wild notion of inviting Mr Sackbutt to lunch at the Mitre or the Randolph in slap-up style. He would order Nuits-Saint-Georges and get it exactly right. But a moment's reflection made this seem a dismal and inferior idea, and Phil in

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fact sat dumb for another half-hour while Mr Sackbutt, who was clearly a conscientious man, did his duty by a new and important client. Not that Phil wasn't rather bewildered, as well as depressed, at the end of it all, so that it was with a dispirited gesture that he eventually drew attention again to the cheque. 'But I suppose I can leave it with you?' he asked.

'Certainly you can. And I think our best plan at the moment will be to utilize the Bank of England's Five Day Scheme. Let me explain it to you.'

But Phil had had enough of the mysteries of finance.

'And can I have some cash?' he asked.

'Cash?' It seemed as if Mr Sackbutt had to think for a minute before he could place this trivial and unfamiliar word. 'There need be no great difficulty there, I feel. Just how much, Mr Tombs, would it be convenient for you to receive?'

'Fourteen pounds.'

'Fourteen pounds?' Phil was aware of being looked at for the first time not as a perilously declassy young artisan but as a human being carrying his own enigmas. 'I think we can certainly run to that.'

'It's what I've been earning.'

'I see. Yes, I see.' Mr Sackbutt hesitated, rather as if he were on the verge of becoming a human being too. Then he recovered himself. 'And a cheque-book,' he said. 'You had better have that. It will be convenient, after all, to regard a hundred or two of this – um – capital sum as in effect upon current account. The cashier will arrange it for you as you leave. And I am myself always available, you will understand, during business hours.'

'Thanks a lot. See you some more, then.' Phil stood up, and found he was again being shaken hands with.

'A banker can sometimes advise on a number of things.' Mr Sackbutt hesitated again, ceased to look professionally calming and benevolent, and this time plunged heroically. 'Not necessarily about the money. For all this means a big change for you, I imagine. You'll be finding yourself, perhaps, in unfamiliar circumstances, and so on. So if you get yourself into any sort of' – Mr Sackbutt pulled himself up short before what was



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plainly to have been 'trouble' – 'into any situation where the experience of an older man might help –'

'Yes,' Phil said awkwardly 'Yes, I see I mean, thanks again.' He moved confusedly towards the door. He ought to have been touched, perhaps. Or, alternatively, angry. But he was young and healthy, and he had been living in a state of excitement for days. So he was simply enormously hungry. And with this enormous, even symbolical, hunger he went out of the bank. He'd have a meal, and it needn't be a quick one. He wasn't meeting Beryl for a couple of hours yet. He still had time to *think* and he'd better begin now.

Only he didn't. Because when he stepped out on the pavement it was to run straight into Sharples – him of the evening before.

### *Chapter Seven*

'PETER!' Phil said. It was funny having made a new pal just that way, but he could see from Peter's quick look that they were pals all right. 'I sent that P.O.,' he said.

'And it's true? It is, you? Of course it must be.'

'You seen a paper or something?' Phil grinned cheerfully. 'Course it's true. Can't you see by the look of me?' And this here is my bank.'

'It's my bank too, for that matter.'

'Perhaps it is.' Phil was feeling like saying any silly thing. 'But did you ever have a quiet chat with old Sackbutt, the Manager?'

'Of course not. My balance is three pounds. Remember asking me yesterday about having twenty thousand? Was that how much you thought it was going to be?'

'Yes. But my financial position has improved since then. Ameliorated, you might say.'

Peter Sharples took this last expression with a quick blink under his black fringe.

'Know what you're going to do with yourself?' he asked.

'Eat. You and me. Now. Will you?'

'Pompadour?'

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'Best hotel.'

'Nonsense.' Peter looked disturbed. 'Going to your head, man.'

'I'm hungry. And I want to *spend* something. Part with cash – see?' Something seemed to have lifted from off the top of Phil's chest since he'd got clear of the well-meaning Mr Sackbutt. 'You been in these places, Peter?'

'Sometimes.'

'Then come on. You'll show me – see? Or I won't bother to be shown. Ever read *Kipps*?'

'*Kipps*?' Peter stared. 'Yes, I've read *Kipps*.'

'Little draper's assistant came into a fortune just like me – although not nearly so big. Spoons and forks in a hotel got him down. Every sort of snobbery got him down. Wasn't happy till he'd crawled out – lost his money and taken a little shop. All right enough for those days – see?' Phil, still standing on the steps of his new bank, was excited and talking rapidly. Something had come over him, as he could see that Peter saw. But that didn't stop him. 'But not for now. Keep spoons and forks in their place, and they needn't mean a thing. Not nowadays. You have to *use* them, I expect. Just for getting along. Think big – think up to your opportunities, like – nobody's going to mind. Not anybody that matters. Isn't that right.'

'I'm not sure that I know.' Peter was taking a quick look at Phil that was rather like old Sackbutt's look. 'But I'll come along. If you pay, that is. I don't fancy doing another Pompadour getaway – not after remembering not to eat rice pudding with a spoon.'

'I won't eat rice pudding at all. And I've got fourteen nicker. Let's try to spend ten.'

'Eight.' Peter was now leading the way through an Oxford rush hour. 'If we looked like going beyond that, they might ask for a deposit. And that would make you feel like Kipps, after all.' Peter hesitated. 'Undermine your confidence in the niceness of things.'

Phil shouted with laughter. And it was only before the revolving doors of the hotel that he had a qualm.

'Peter –' he began.

But Peter scarcely paused.

'You've come into a fortune,' he said. 'Acquired private means. Or call it public means, since half Britain has contributed. Public means which public manner breeds. That's Shakespeare. So now for the public manners. A blow-out. It's vulgar, but we're vulgar too. Ever had caviare?'

'Caviare and pink champagne.' Phil wasn't going to be over-called by this transformed Peter Sharples. 'And in we go.'

He'd been right about the spoons and forks. They didn't exist. He just didn't notice them. But he noticed what they ate and drank. Not caviare but smoked salmon. Not pink champagne but hock. With a lot of other things. And he noticed them not just as one big blurred effect, but each sharply and individually. Peter did the ordering – not, Phil could see, much to the manner born, but knowledgeably and confidently. It showed you. Of course Peter was very clever, but in his heart Phil had no notion that he was himself entirely a fool. So it showed you how open the world was to any clever observant chap. As for this business of eating expensively, Phil just had a natural talent for it, like he had for some things in electricity. And Peter seemed to have it too. Peter was taking the menu as seriously as if it was his poor old Labour Party's *Forward to Socialism* or whatever. No dish was worth considering, Peter said, that wasn't substantial and subtle at once. It was a notion that seemed to call up rather a heavy meal even for twenty-one-year-olds. By the time their pancakes had been concocted over a spirit-affair on a table beside them, and well soused on Peter's instructions in Green Chartreuse, they knew as well as any two elderly gourmets that only brandy and coffee taken at large leisure would comfortably close the occasion. So finally there they were, a little solemn but entirely pleased with themselves.

'We ought to say we were just as happy in the Pompadour,' Peter said. 'But it wouldn't be true.'

'It wouldn't be true.' Phil swirled his brandy entirely expertly in its large bubble of glass. 'This is my life.'

'No – that isn't true either.' Peter shook his head sagaciously,

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so that his black fringe, that seemed to have grown a quarter of an inch nearer his eyebrows since yesterday, swayed gently. 'It's not really your life, any more than it's mine.'

'Why not? I expect that even Labour M.P.'s get a lot of meals like this. Every day, when there's a Labour Government.

'And paid for out of Mr Philip Tombs's Surtax?' Peter shook his head again. He had just rather startled Phil by calling for cigars. 'Don't you believe it I never sponged a meal like this before, and I don't expect I'll ever so much as try to again. Don't you think there are things that happen only once?'

'That's right There are things that happen only once and this is one of them.' It seemed to Phil that Peter had said a deep thing, such as could drop only from one who was enjoying a Varsity education 'It wouldn't do – not going on like this, it wouldn't Screwing and drinking and eating '

'What's that?' Peter looked startled

'Rot a man in no time Something a pal of mine said And yet I don't know, you know Scoff like this is all right for some chaps every day And knocking back the brandy and all ' Rather cautiously, Phil knocked back some brandy 'Course, it wouldn't make you happy for long Just this time, that's more a matter of you and me, come to think of it But just as a comfortable *habit* ' Very oddly, Phil quite lost the thread of his remarks. 'Here!' he said 'Will you do the paying? I'll shove the lolly at you under the table '

'Not for half an hour yet Light your cigar, man One match just to char the end, and a second really to get going And you'll pay yourself.' Peter laughed 'You've seen all this being done on the flicks That's where I've seen it too But not happiness '

'No – you never see happiness on the flicks Not really A chap might think he'd be happy with Jayne Mansfield But would he? It's all illusion, as you might say, that sort of thing '

Peter's voice had dropped and gone rather husky. 'There are just some moments that come, like this one, without planning. There's just that' – Peter paused to apply the second match with careful steadiness to his own cigar – 'and giving yourself to some large impersonal purpose.'

'Like getting to the moon?'

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'Like getting to the moon, if you like '

'That's what a pal of mine says I ought to do Now I've got this money Get to the moon '

'You could do better, if you ask me ' Even if Peter got half-jarred Phil thought, he'd go on being serious really 'I mean, you may get to the moon but you're not likely to make much impression on it Changing things is the true joy of life, isn't it? Creating new institutions new kinds of thought new ways of feeling - that, and seeing them grow '

Phil took a deep breath He'd read things like that He'd heard them drooling out of the radio But he'd never had them from somebody of his own age, and over the remains of a stupendous meal

'You'd be changing the - the whole human situation like,' Phil said boldly Getting to the moon, I mean Give human beings a new notion of themselves Show them they've been behaving kind of small scripping away for colonies and that, just down here '

We'll get rid of scripping by getting rid of financial and industrial chaos You just can't have decent life on top of a nightmare of greed and muddle Not even your new friends the rich can '

'I'm not having new rich friends Not just like that ' Phil was vague but emphatic I've got to think my way past all that, haven't I?'

'All right But what I say's true The rich don't get much life - not really They know what they're sitting on the lid of It seeps up through their fat behinds and seeps into their heads as a haunting guilt and anxiety You can see it in their gilded youth All that stalking about in breeches and bowler hats is a sham There's a complete failure of confidence underneath '

'That's right ' Phil knew that he was responding to a vocabulary and a tone that weren't what really made Peter Sharples interesting to him And he knew that he didn't himself agree in his head He remembered Sir Aubrey Moore in Melchizedek's Old Melchizedek had got the better of the silly kid, of course But Phil didn't believe in the theory of much guilt and anxiety in young Sir Bleeding Aubrey It even

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occurred to him that Peter's P.P.E., whatever it was, didn't insure a chap against the survival of fixed ideas picked up earlier on. But he didn't challenge Peter on this. 'That's right,' he repeated good-humouredly, and finishing his brandy. 'But I'm not political.'

'You've got brains, I'd say.'

'I got *something* under the hatch.' Phil grinned at Peter. 'But, somehow, it always goes wandering round, like. Never would fix itself on the sodding binomial theorem and that. Which is why my schooling didn't take, isn't it? Nothing special about me, Peter. You'd think a thing like this would put you on top of things. So it does, just now and then. But it takes the bleeding use out of you as well. See? This place is new. Just listening to you is new. Remember your saying, yesterday in the Pompadour, money lets a chap change himself the way he wants to change himself? Well, I been thinking. And it's a race, it seems to me. Change or be changed, see? Peter, I *got* to find something big to latch on to. Haven't I? Or it's curtains. Screwing and eating and drinking, like my pal said. I ain't all that strong. I know I'm not. P'raps I'm only a bleeding little Kipps. Christ, I'd be desperate.'

Peter Sharples had listened to this sudden appeal – as it plainly was – round-eyed. But he was clever and Phil could almost see him thinking – could see him thinking back into this Varsity education for an answer.

'You've got curiosity, haven't you?' Peter asked. 'Give it a fair go. It's what will see you through.'

'Curiosity? Takes you into knocking-shops, that does.'

'Don't be a bloody fool.' For the first time, Peter was angry. 'A thing isn't silly just because school teachers and dons plug it at you. Knowledge is the hard road to the best buy. Socrates, who was the first don, said something like that. It might be your buy. It might be what you mean by saying you're not political.'

Phil shook his head – so emphatically that his biggest curl came down over his nose. At the same time he glanced round the nearly empty restaurant.

'I say,' he said anxiously, 'oughtn't we to be getting out?'

'Not till it's our fancy, man. Not like the Pompadour. Those chaps are hired to go on standing around. Chief one would go out on his own neck if he brought you your bill before you asked for it.'

'No kidding?' Phil was much impressed.

'Well, it's the theory. Of course he may take liberties, if he thinks we're young and unassuming.'

'He *has* been looking at us.' Phil in his turn looked covertly at the head waiter. 'Would five bob be right for the tip?'

'Fifteen, at least. Roughly speaking, about ten per cent of the bill.'

'Fifteen bob!' It was Phil who was round-eyed now. 'If knowing *that* is what you call knowledge, it must have put back Socrates quite a bit. But listen. Of course your knowledge isn't me either. I'd not be like I am now – not counting the pools coming home, I mean – if I'd been born an egg-head. I'd have gone scrambling up the ladder same as you, Peter, and never taking my nose out of what they were feeding me, except to see those other little niggers falling off. It's experience I want, isn't it?' Phil knew that he was looking quite anxiously at Peter. 'Wouldn't you say that would be me? Sounds vague. Sounds as vague as Kipps. But I do mean something by it. Experience that's not as small and cheap as Gas Street.'

'Gas Street?'

'And New Street. Have you ever looked at this tower – Tom Tower – from down New Street?' Phil was ceasing to be very coherent. 'Do you know the Primitive Methodists 1843? *It's* an experience, I suppose, and so is Gas Street, all right. But what *I* want is something on a level, like, that I just don't know about. Get?'

'You're a romantic,' Peter said.

'What d'you mean – a romantic?' Phil was thinking how spotty was even the knowledge he possessed. 'Chap in a cheap yarn?'

'Chap that *must* have life coming at him big. Fine day, if you latch on to something that *is* big. Socialism. The moon. Being a poet. Being mad about music.' Peter also was not too coherent now. 'Failing that, you'll hitch it on to sex. That's

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what you'll do. Blow up sex as the rich and idle always have done. Oh, I don't mean leching round, and chucking about your money to lay this girl and that. That was your pal's idea – the one that talks about screwing and eating and drinking. All wrong. Not you, that wouldn't be. I mean elevating the concerns of the senses to the sphere of the imagination. Follow?'

Phil didn't exactly follow. But he suspected Peter of having fired something out of a book at him, and he resented this.

'Thanks a lot,' he said rudely. 'But I got a girl – see? I know my way around.'

'That's it. That's what you won't put up with – knowing your way around, and finding it what you call small and cheap. Knowing your way around what any Gas Street adolescent calls sex – you won't take it, man. You'll want something on a cloud – and all gilt-edged, like Sackbutt's securities.'

'Here – let's get out of this.' Phil was embarrassed and a bit angry. He was embarrassed because he'd suddenly seen – it was what you'd call a purely intuitive thing – that this Peter Sharples, although his own age, was a sodding virgin. It was a gulf between them – and all part of this business of one kid being caught up one way, and one another. And he was a bit angry because, in Peter, this went with a streak of malice – but you could understand and forgive that – and with a sort of acuteness on, you might say, the theoretical side. Even when Peter talked out of a book there was sense in it. And that's education, Phil thought.

They were out in the street and walking down it. And Peter was still talking.

'Do you know what, Phil? I think you ought to come up.'

'What d'you mean – come up?'

'To the university. I don't expect it would take terribly long to manage. I'll fix it you talk to my tutor about it. He knows all the dodges.'

'Tombs the Terror of Trinity. Phil the Fool of Bleeding Balliol.' Phil, because embarrassed again, did his laughing quick and loud. 'What about another meal first, Peter? When can you come again?'



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'That's over – like we agreed But you come to tea with me. Meet some people'

'Thanks a lot Phil was again hasty. 'But I'll be clearing out of Oxford for a bit'

'Then when you come back' Peter pointed at an arched gateway across the street 'Just go in and ask They'll tell you where I am'

'See you some more, then, Peter'

They looked at each other and there was a moment's troubled silence Oxford's traffic rumbled through it unregarding There was a red box on the pavement beside them, with an *Evening Standard* poster leaning against it The poster didn't have Phil's photo But it did begin *Young Oxford Worker Wins* –

Phil saw that Peter was looking at it too

'Peter,' he said, 'd you know how it makes me feel? Hunted Man Like in a film It came on me yesterday, just before we met'

'Quite right, too You'll be hunted all right Phil Brass without class – that's what you are Peter said it, Phil noticed, exactly like his auntie would 'So run like hell when you see the other thing'

'The other thing?'

'Class without brass man' Peter said it with a laugh, but also with a straight look Like we ran yesterday

'Christ we ran, Phil said And he gave Peter a grin and walked away

## Chapter Fight

KEEP death off the road he said to himself as he shoved open the door of the shed where the Griffin kids' old man let him store his motor-bike And for a minute he was pretty doubtful. He never went on the thing – not that he'd have told anyone – with as much as a second pint in him, and all that wine and brandy came to more than that But he was dead sober all the same. The kick in the stuff had somehow gone another way –

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perhaps into the excitement he'd felt during that long chinning with Peter. Now would be the time to do that thinking, he felt. He wished he could just spin into the country by himself. But he reached for a rag and dusted the pillion seat. He had his date.

And perhaps – he decided as he wove down the High Street – it was best to march straight into this bit without thinking. They didn't go together, Beryl and thinking didn't. There had been a time when he had studied her, you might say. He'd studied Beryl in particular against everything he could pick up about girls in general. That was only sense. Same as with engines, you have to learn the tick if you expect results. But you couldn't call the process thinking. And even when he'd become kind of grateful, and fond of her in an easy way in spite of having to go on having her or go cracked, you still couldn't say there was any sort of thinking job in it. And never would be, even if they went on till they had grand-kids around them. No – Beryl and thinking didn't go together. Or certainly not thinking big. There wasn't much scale to Beryl, as George Pratley had hinted.

But now he was through the crush on Magdalen Bridge, and when he gave a twist to the throttle that sent him up the Iffley Road like a bullet, it wasn't impatience with his lot that was getting him. It was just impatience to cover the next half-mile. Think afterwards, he told himself. And start from somewhere easier – from Peter's ideas, or George's, or even the old chap's in the bank. Beryl is something that *happens*.

He swung round a bus and roared up the hill. By the telephone kiosk she'd be. And in a skirt. She did always dress like he told her to.

She was waiting. He was careful always to have it that way, since Beryl liked things ordinary. She was waiting in skin-tight black pants that made her look like a half-naked Hottentot. And with a scarf round her head

Phil drew into the kerb, stopped, kicked down the parking-strut. He mustn't be furious. She'd been thinking up a bit of what her magazines called allure. Perhaps to celebrate. He

dismounted and they held hands. He drew her close and they kissed – doing a quarter turn on their hips, like on the silver screen. He passed his hands across her shoulders caressingly and then down to just below her waist. Public ritual. He stood back.

‘Where’s your skid-lid?’ he asked.

It was the scarf even more than the pants that he didn’t like. The scarf was printed all over with luggage labels saying the names of Riviera hotels. Probably he’d never have liked it. He disliked it in some special way now, but he didn’t give himself time to inquire what. She wasn’t going without the helmet – not on his bike, she wasn’t.

‘I forgot it,’ she said. ‘Let’s go, Phil.’

‘All right. But we’ll go back and pick it up on the way.’

‘I don’t want to go back,’ Beryl tossed her head. ‘Not on this old thing.’ She pointed at Phil’s bike. ‘And the helmets are silly. Everybody says so. And I had my hair done. You’ll see.’

He felt jolted. It wasn’t because of Beryl dressing silly and defiant. It wasn’t because of what she’d said. There was just something about her. She wasn’t like herself, quite. And yet she didn’t seem excited, as she would be if she’d heard. So she couldn’t have heard. After all, they never took a newspaper in her house, unless it would be the *News of the World* for her dad to lie in bed with on Sunday morning.

‘You not heard the news?’ he asked.

‘News? News don’t mean a thing. Let’s go.’

‘This news does. It’s about us. I got something to tell you about yourself, young Beryl.’

That was what he’d called her first, and he thought it would bring her round now. But she only looked dead scared.

‘Oh, let’s go,’ she said, kind of recovering herself. ‘What’s any news you’d have?’ She turned to the bike and started getting on the pillion. ‘Bought a Rolls, perhaps?’

‘Not yet, I haven’t.’ It wasn’t going nice or comfortable, but he was prepared to grin and be triumphant. ‘But might do.’

‘Might, might you? Well, Fred Prescott, now, he has. A car, anyway.’

‘Fred bought a car?’ Phil found this funny. ‘He didn’t tell

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me that this morning, Fred didn't. Old Ruby saloon, I expect.' He stopped, rather struck. 'What you know about Fred Prescott's doings, young Beryl?'

'Don't know nothing,' Beryl spoke hastily. 'Fred's sister told my friend, see? Still, it's enterprise, that is. Too careful by half, you are. Like them that choose security in the Building Society adverts, is steady Phil Tombs.' Beryl flung up her head again like she was scared really to death to hear herself. Kid was going to cry. He stared at her.

'You'll wear mine,' he said, and hauled off his skid-lid. 'Won't disgrace you by going down Sophokels Grove on the old flivver.' Sophokels Grove was what they called her street. Beat Gas Street, come to think of it. Other extreme, you might say. Professors on the City Council. And he nipped off *Idéal Séjour Cannes* and the rest of them and clapped the helmet on her new perm. 'We'll get cracking.' He smacked her behind, trying to get her friendly. 'Who stuffed you in those things?' he asked. 'Only a blind man would put in time trying to get a girl out of pants like that. Job he'd have too. But you wait.'

No, it wasn't going well. It was going nasty. They'd better get into the country and start again.

'Then we're off,' he said. 'I want you in bluebells, see? Middle of a river of them.' He didn't like it as he said it. It wasn't nice, it wasn't, being deliberate with things like that. Anyway, she didn't react as planned.

'What's that about knowing something about myself? Who's told you news? Never can talk straight, can you?'

He stared at her again. For she was looking at him full of funk and he didn't know what. And then suddenly she nipped from the pillion and grabbed him and kissed him and shoved herself up against him about two points beyond the public ritual you might say was proper in Aeschylus Avenue. The budgerigars in the windows of what these people called their lounges must be gorging at them.

'All right,' he said. 'Hold it. And the news will keep.' He was determined it *would* keep. He didn't quite know why, but he was clear he couldn't come out with this enormous thing straight on top of a bad patch like this. At the same time he

had an obscure feeling that he was letting Beryl down by not shouting it at once. He shoved this away. 'Get on again,' he said. And he said it the way she wasn't allowed to disobey. She let him go, and climbed on.

'What about you?' she said. She meant about the skid-ld.

'It's always the one behind goes over.' He snapped it brief and careless, since she hadn't herself spoken like she was interested. 'If we hit something, you'll know, young Beryl.'

And then they were zipping up the ring road. She was astride behind him, with one hand on the grip at the back of the saddle and the other round his trouser-belt. Soon it had shifted, this one, and shoved up the tail of his sweat-shirt, and its knuckles were on the skin at the base of his spine. But somehow that familiar half square-inch of contact had gone wrong – whether on his side or hers he couldn't say. And he took the corners viciously, with his bare head over the handlebars. It was hot, and the air was swimming up from the tarmac. Kind of mirage. And he found he could almost get imagining things – imagining the other girl's face in it. Jean's face.

So it needn't have been Beryl's fault that matters still went badly later. He couldn't help it that suddenly there was this other girl – and wasn't he trying to treat her as the dream she probably was? But Beryl might be sensing the dream in the air, and that was what was wrong. Only that wasn't really the feel of it. For when he rolled over on his back in the grass, and she ought to have been doing her funny yawn and stretch, he caught her looking at him sharp and calculating and dead scared again in a way that shook him badly. He remembered Artie Coutts. Perhaps, he thought, Beryl had to tell him what he wouldn't believe was possible, only you never knew. It must be a real crisis for a girl, that – since she could never be quite sure she'd be done right by. But, even if it was that, she'd behaved oddly. She'd clung to him as if it was the last time it would be him she'd cling to. And at the same time she'd acted like she just lacked the courage to pull out on him. There was something she wouldn't speak out. And it didn't make things better that, so far, he hadn't spoken out either. It was getting

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crazy not to have told her by this time. So now he rolled over on his side to speak to her. And there she was, rolled over on her side towards him – with hot stormy eyes and what he somehow knew was going to be a torrent of desperate unexpected speech.

‘Beryl –’ he began quickly – for once more he had that obscure feeling that he was being unfair to her every minute he kept quiet about the utter change in his life. But he didn’t get any further.

‘Good afternoon,’ a voice said from above him. ‘You’ve gone rather badly astray, haven’t you?’

Phil sat up and took the man in. He must have been standing near by, waiting for what you might call a polite moment. His question had been polite, and had been put straight not sarky.

‘Sorry,’ Phil said.

The man’s eyebrows lifted just a shade, as if this wasn’t the reply he’d expected. But if he was polite he was angry.

‘You can hardly be unaware,’ he asked, ‘that you are on private property?’

Beryl had sat up too. She giggled. Phil felt furious, and felt at the same time a spurt of tenderness. He hated that giggle. At the time he knew that Beryl hadn’t found it easy to produce, since she was frightened out of her wits. But she felt it was the way to back him up.

‘I don’t think we’ve done any damage,’ Phil said. Although for various reasons he was feeling awkwardly disarranged, he managed to say it stiffly. He’d no notion of crawling to a sodding landowner. But as he spoke his glance went past Beryl to the heap of bluebells she’d insisted on tearing up. She’d said she was going to take them all home. And now they looked like a cartload. That was why this fellow was furious. ‘All right,’ Phil said. ‘I oughtn’t to have gathered all these. Careless of me. Pay if you like.’

Beryl didn’t seem to like this. And now she managed to speak – although in rather a squeaky way that sounded ridiculous.

‘We thought this was a public park,’ she said. ‘Didn’t we, Phil?’

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The man turned to her courteously. He was elderly, with the sort of face they called bronzed and fit, and he was in old flannel trousers, a faded silk shirt, and a battered panama. A bleeding gentleman all right, Phil thought.

'If you did *that*, you know, in a public park' – and the man pointed at the bluebells – 'I am afraid you'd be taken into a police court and fined. I don't sue trespassers on my land. But I do try to reason with them.'

Beryl giggled again. This time she probably couldn't help it. But it produced almost uncontrollable rage in Phil. If the man had been his own age he'd have clocked him, he thought, and taken a chance of a successful bolt. But that was no go. And what made it worse was that the old sod was somehow hinting a streak of modified approval of Phil. And at the same time his look was saying that he didn't think much of Phil's taste. Yes, Phil could have murdered him.

'I certainly don't want to be paid for the flowers,' the man said. 'But another time – and whether on my land or somewhere else – I would just like you to think I don't object to wayfarers. I don't object, as a matter of fact, to young people seeking privacy. But I do object – unexpectedly – his level voice suddenly rose – to vandalism and hooliganism and rooting up living things.'

'Everybody likes gathering flowers,' Beryl said suddenly defiant. 'Fine ladies fill whole drawing rooms with them. I seen it in the mags. And why don't you put up notices, if you want them left alone?'

'Perhaps because this isn't a public park and nobody ever really took it for one.' The man turned to Phil. 'It might be as well if you now went your way. Follow the stream – it's very pleasant – and please don't go into the woodland. When you come to a footbridge you'll see a gate on your left. The lady will find a small notice on the other side of it, I believe. Go through, and you'll be on a bridle path. You have a perfect right there.' The man took off his panama like Beryl might be a whole garden-party. 'Good afternoon,' he said, and walked away.

There was a moment's silence, and then Beryl managed a

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*peal of high-pitched mocking laughter. Phil stared at her dumbly. She was backing him up again – not that she looked as if she just loved him at the moment. Her eyes were resentful. And, correspondingly, rage once more rose in him.*

'The bastard,' he said. 'I'd very-pleasant him, I would, if he wasn't a bleeding grandfather. Good afternoon and may I reason with you. Christ!' He yanked Beryl to her feet so roughly that she wobbled inside her ugly black pants. 'Come on. We'll get out of this before I go after him and kick him on his sodding country seat.' His fury rose higher because he felt there was something wrong with it. 'Buy him up, I could' he said. 'Buy him up and not notice it.'

Beryl had taken a step back and was standing among the raped bluebells. She was clawing awkwardly for shoulder-straps. He stooped, picked up a flimsy garment and tossed it at her.

'You've forgotten this,' he said. 'Shove it away. We're getting out.'

'Bolting,' Beryl said suddenly jeering. 'Why didn't you speak up at him? I know them as would have.'

'What d'you mean – you know them as would have?' He swung round on her, obscurely catching in her words he didn't know what. 'It's his land, isn't it?'

'There you are – cursing at him and not really meaning it. What did you say to his face, I ask you? Sorry and please let me pay.' Beryl kicked the bluebells petulantly. 'No sort of man, you aren't. What's that word your auntie calls you? Mardy Phil – that's you.'

He realized that he didn't give a sod either way for the chap who'd turned them out. That wasn't what had thrown him into a rage at all. His mind pulled up with a jerk, as if in a second it would come out on something it didn't want to.

'Don't get upset, young Beryl,' he said. 'We're going back to the flivver. We're going to find a good tea. Ham, eggs, crumpets, honey, jam, everything.' He watched a faint anticipation of pleasure struggle in Beryl's face. 'And I got something to tell you – something more super than you could think.' He went over to her, put an arm round her and kissed her.



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*'Surprise of your life'* He swept the other arm round the blue-bell glade and its enclosing woods. *'Did I say I could buy up all this?'* Well, I could. Serious.

She drew back, round-eyed and frightened. Probably she supposed he'd gone cracked.

*'What d'you mean?'* she said on a high note.

*'What I say.'* He remembered it ought to be a moment of triumph. *'What do you think I do Monday?'*

*'What?'* She'd gone white.

*'Ask for my cards. Or not even that.'*

*'You wouldn't!'*

*'Shall?'*

*'Why, Phil – tell me why!'* Queerly she was in a sort of panic.

*'You'll see. At tea, I'll tell you. Come on.'*

She followed him down the little stream. He made straight for where they'd been told, without turning to look at her.

Because it was a fine Saturday the roadsides were lined with the cars of people picnicking. Phil wondered why they didn't get further afield and out of each other's dust. Perhaps they had more respect for landowners than he had. But probably, although no one car loud seemed ever to speak to its neighbours, they liked urban company and distrusted any approach to country solitude. From the portable radios the conflicting noises of several programmes jostled each other in the petrol-soaked air. From one side of the road there would be band music, and from the other the staccato jabber of some sporting commentary, wearily quickening in tempo every now and then to suggest uncontrollable excitement.

Beryl again on the pillion called out to Phil to admire any particularly big or shiny car, or the deployment on the jaded grass verge of a striking display of folding furniture. There seemed to be hardly anybody out on motor bikes, and she called attention to this too. But that was all automatic. That Phil was going to tell her something seemed to have gone out of her head again. She didn't even begin clamouring for information when they'd sat down to tea in a kind of farm

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place Phil had spotted down a lane. Probably she'd decided he had just been talking big or silly because of how they'd been challenged and humiliated among the bluebells. Or perhaps – he still thought – there was something in her own mind that got in the way of her much attending to him. Anyway he had to start in on it again himself.

'Listen,' he said, putting down his cup. 'It's queer you haven't heard. All over Oxford, it must be. The pools come home on me, see? And big.' He paused. 'Bigger than to anybody else this season.' He looked at her and saw that her face wasn't expressing anything. And figures, he thought, wouldn't convey much. 'An enormous fortune,' he said. 'More money than you could ever think of. Understand?'

This time Beryl made a queer noise, and her mouth trembled. Then she took a gulp of tea.

'You're just saying it,' she said. She was looking at him wildly, and her voice rose – so that it sounded ugly like he'd never noticed it. 'Say you're just saying it, Phil! Say you are!'

He stared at her bewildered in the way he seemed always to be doing this afternoon. Nothing was as you expected when a thing like this happened. Beryl looked as if she was going to cry again, and he thought he'd try her with a cigarette. But when he put his hand in his pocket for the packet, what it came on was the scarf with the hotels on it. He had a sudden impulse, pulled this out, shoved aside some plates, and spread the thing out in front of her.

'Look,' he said, like it might be to a small kid. And he put a finger on the scarf at random. 'Read that.'

Beryl gulped. And she looked at him resentfully, so that he thought she was still obstinately thinking he was kidding her.

'Can't,' she said.

'Well, I can.' He looked. 'It says *Negresco, Nice*.' It was a queer name, he found himself thinking, to give a hotel. 'We could go there, we could.' He shifted his finger to another luggage label. '*Réserve, Miramar*. Place called Cannes. And another there too. *Gonnet et Reine*. I tell you, we could go any of these places. We could go all of them. Grand tour, Beryl. And in that Rolls.'

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There was a silence. He was thinking as he spoke how crazy it all was. He was talking like a millionaire in a novelette setting about seducing a shop girl. Whereas he had seduced Beryl – if she hadn't seduced him – months and months ago. And now she was producing the sort of sniff that went before she was going to cry.

'No kidding,' he said desperately. The woman was coming to see if they wanted more cakes or more hot water. She'd think it was just a lovers' quarrel, no doubt. But if it was, it was a balmy one. 'No kidding. Of course we got to think sensible.'

'And you never told me.'

She had cried out, and he was astonished.

'What you mean – never told you?'

'It happened weeks ago – months ago. I'm sure it did. And you never told. It's mean you are – mean, mean, *mean*!'

He wasn't angry – or he didn't know he was. The thing had knocked the poor kid silly.

'Of course it didn't,' he said. 'Think! You can't hide a thing like that for weeks. And why should I? I only knew – knew for certain, that is – yesterday afternoon. And it just hadn't begun to happen, last time we were out.'

He saw the scarf begin to move on the table between them. Beryl was plucking at it. Then suddenly she had crumpled it up and was weeping into the cheap fabric and its resplendent labels: *Royal et Westminster, Venise et Continental, Suisse et Illes d'Hyères, L'Insolence, Pin Dore, Argon, Parc* – one by one they darkened beneath the large slow tears.

## PART TWO: LONDON

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### *Chapter Nine*

PHIL found he didn't know why he was on the 10.20 on Monday morning. Until after he'd been to the Savings Bank and taken out all he had there – for somehow he hadn't felt like facing old Sackbutt's place again so soon – he hadn't really been sure of what he was doing. But now here he was, with this abandoned old cemetery going past him on the right like a wrecker's yard, and London just over an hour ahead.

Or rather he knew a number of whys, but they didn't seem to add up.

Sunday had been far worse than he'd expected. It was really true that people came and sat on the doorstep. Orders of magnitude again, he saw. Shift the decimal point one to the left and it might only have been a small-time crowd hoping to cash in with some kind of low-class confidence stuff – that or honest enough bread-line white-collar blokes trying to sell the usual junk on commission. But, with the decimal point where it was, it had been different. There had been the local M.P., offering to give friendly advice as required. The titled lady hadn't turned up – or not the one with daughters. But there had been another one with dogs, and her idea was that she and Phil should own a lot of horses together. She wouldn't be able to put up much of the capital, she'd explained, and her punch-line had been that she had horses in her blood. She'd looked like a horse, too, Phil remembered, so perhaps a stallion had got at a female ancestor of hers the way you read in mythology. A pity he hadn't shot that one at her, he thought. There had been several clergymen. And there had been people he just knew the name of, making out they were quite pals, with an eye to sponging later on. After a bit Phil had just cleared out again and spent most of the day in hiding. But Oxford was a rotten place to hide in. That was one reason why he was going to London now.

But not just in this way. He had on his best suit – the one

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made in the expensive shop in Reading Lovat, the stuff was called. He had on his blue homespun tie, and plain natural silk shirt, and the shoes he'd one day marched in and bought in the shop in Turl Street Long before what had now happened to him, it had amused him – having an eye for clothes as he had – to work up this disguise Sexton Blake or his boy Tinker couldn't have done better Until Phil opened his mouth, Phil wasn't Phil at all Which could, upon occasion, make opening his mouth satisfactorily disconcerting And when Phil now grinned at the thought of this, he found himself even grinning in the right way He stood up for a copy of *The Times* he'd pitched into the rack It wasn't because he really wanted to get behind *The Times* – his grin broadened as he saw there was a joke in this – and so complete the disguise It was that he liked the feel of the fit of the trousers round the hips and in the crotch, and the jacket that didn't hump up his shoulders with padding the way the clothes from cheap places did When he sat down again it was with the air of one too accustomed to modest luxury to notice it He'd bought himself, of course, a first class ticket

*Sodding little Kipps*, another Phil seemed to murmur in Phil's ear But he didn't take this seriously, any more than he did his auntie nattering at him that it was vanity would get him He was all right Even now – with this queer feeling he had of firm ground shelving away beneath his feet and new forces swaying him so that at any moment he'd have to strike out and swim – even now he was all right He put a hand in a jacket pocket – you let these sort of pockets go a bit baggy – and brought out a pipe and a tobacco pouch With these he began to experiment After all, his life was going to be experiment now – experiment with the sky the limit

But another reason for his being on this train was Beryl. When he'd been trying to explain things to her – still in that kind of farm where they'd got a very good meat tea – he'd told her how when you have a lot of money you invest it and have a private income And he'd told her about Prendick and his crowd in London, and how they ran something they called an advisory service He'd thought Beryl wasn't understanding

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a thing, but she'd surprised him by saying at once that he must go up to London and see about it. It was queer how she'd suddenly turned keen on the idea of investment – not knowing, he could pretty well have sworn, of the existence of it ten minutes earlier. And when he'd said old Sackbutt could fix him up just as well as Prendick's lot, she said No, because nothing was any good in Oxford compared with London, as you could tell by the rotten old shops. Oxford banks would be stick-in-the-mud joints, just like the places sold you brassières and beauty packs. He'd better go, and do it all thorough. A week it might take him, Beryl had said.

He'd stared at her, feeling she needed thinking about. But of course what was in his head was something else, and he had to face it. He was going to find Prendick's place, and find Prendick's secretary, and discover whether she existed, whether there was the slightest sense in which she really did exist for him. If she didn't perhaps she'd fade like a dream – a dream that has come up at you out of nowhere and that is the only real thing while you're dreaming it and that sinks away again unresistingly when you wake up. It was also possible, of course, that she *wouldn't* fade like a dream even after she'd turned out to be one as far as *he* was concerned. He thought he could take that, an unrequited passion or whatever it was called, better than this coming and going like an obsession of something he'd invented, you might say, on the strength of eighty seconds' experience or thereabouts.

This Jean – why, he knew nothing about her. He couldn't even *see* her now. When he tried to, she was no more than a silhouette against the dusty sunlight of the mean little street behind her. He mightn't recognize her if he came face to face with her – and yet here he was kidding himself like out of one of Beryl's mags. As he told himself this, Phil felt himself blush – above that nice blue tie. And then suddenly – it shook him – one of those psychological things occurred, and there was Jean's face clear in his mind, and he realized Yes, that he'd known that her eyebrows were like that, rather level, and fine without seeming to be plucked – but only now he'd noticed this other thing about them, that they almost came together the

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way some people's do, and that it seemed to be just this tiny blemish that carried the final shock of her, you might say, straight down his spine. It didn't make sense that in an instant and all inside his head he should be seeing, far clearer than a photo, and in some details for the first time, a face that seconds ago he'd decided he could no longer see at all. And now it was gone again, leaving his whole body as if he'd been running hard. If it didn't shake him. He'd be thinking he had an imagination next.

Then, like when you wake up and hear the first stroke of the hour, the last stroke of which has wakened you, with just that kind of time-jerk that would set you thinking if you weren't hurried on, Phil heard a voice in this railway compartment that for minutes hadn't been existing for him.

'Imagination,' the voice said disgustedly. 'They haven't a glimmer of it. They can't *see*.'

There was only one other passenger in the compartment, so if he wasn't talking to himself he was talking to Phil. A look at him suggested that he *was* talking to himself, or at least that he was the sort of person who might go in for that kind of thing. He was about five years older than Phil. And he wasn't nearly so well dressed. Indeed you might have thought that he was travelling first-class either dishonestly or by mistake. Only – Phil saw almost at once – you'd have been wrong. It was just that the young man didn't much think about what he was wearing. Or about his hair – for that was untidy to the point of drama, without, clearly, his spending a penny to get it that way. As it fell over an abnormally high and bumpy forehead, and impended above abnormally glittering eyes, Phil – or the part of Phil that acknowledged the authority of comic strips – knew at once that this was a mad scientist. The young man spoke again.

'That's right,' he said. 'Mad scientist. Colossal brain, and no human feelings at all.'

Phil was so surprised by this challenging and even unmannerly clairvoyance that he remained mute.

'But don't you agree with me?' The young man had been

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looking at his watch. 'They can't even run their trains to time. The whole public transport system in this country is simply the next thing to lunacy. Wouldn't you say?'

Phil felt it was his turn to disconcert. He crossed his beautifully trousered legs. He took a puff at his not too new pipe. He assumed the expression of perfect diffidence that is the hard core of the outfit of the English officer and gent.

'Transport?' he said. 'Never given it a bleeding thought, I haven't, mate.'

'Then you ought to. Everybody ought to.' The young man's expression hadn't flickered, and Phil had to conclude that his little stroke decidedly hadn't come off. 'For instance,' the young man went on urgently, 'have you ever considered what the railways are for?'

'To get you and me to London, I suppose.' Phil now spoke civilly. He rather liked the way his silly trick had been ignored.

'Stuff and nonsense. The rational way to get you and me to London is by some sort of vertical take-off aircraft – that or on a light monorail. This sort of thousand-ton saurian monster' – and the young man gave British Railways an unsparing kick with an ill-polished shoe – 'has only one conceivable economic function. And that's to carry coal.'

'All right,' Phil said. 'Let it carry coal. I don't mind.'

'But precisely what I'm saying is that you *ought* to.' The young man now spoke with surprised indignation, as if Phil were a trusted ally whose unexpected frivolity was letting him down badly. 'I said *conceivable* economic function. Actually, that belongs to the past. But they can't see it. Now, just what' – and the young man flung out a pointing hand at the lines of metal flashing by as the train passed Reading – 'just what did they call all *that* when they put it down? By the way, my name's Mark Thickthorne.'

'Phil Tombs is mine. What did they call it? The permanent way, I suppose.'

'Exactly! There for ever and ever, like the dividends they were going to get out of it all. But it's obsolete. Trundling coal around at all is obsolete. All those rails ought to have been melted down, and all those tracks turned into arterial roads



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half a generation ago. But no – the way's permanent. It makes you weep.'

'You got to have coal, haven't you?' Phil said.

'Of course you don't have to have coal. What you have to have is power. Yet among the political chaps it's only the Liberals that have had a glimmer. And they got it all wrong. Electricity, they said. Turn it all into electricity at the pithead. Now, what do you think of that?' The young man called Mark Thickthorne paused on what was perhaps only a rhetorical question. But Phil felt prompted to speak up.

'All my eye,' Phil said. 'You'd be fighting the heat all the time. The cooling's nine parts of generating electricity in a big way. And what's the use of hollaring for water by the million gallons in the English colliery country. I ask you! Ashamed, they ought to have been. The thing's just not technical.'

'Exactly. And I see you *have* thought about it.' Mark Thickthorne was delighted. He gave British Railways another kick for good measure. 'But what about gas? What about gas, Tombs, my boy?'

Phil had some thought of taking offence at this. It was what might be called familiar. He remembered how Prendick had called him 'Tombs', and that somehow it hadn't been quite nice. The comparison showed him, somehow, that this was all right.

'Gas?' he said. 'Any fool can make gas. At a pit-head. Or down on the seam, if you want to. But what good's gas? All stink and volume. And you couldn't pipe it, man. Not really big. Think of the mains you'd need. Think of your pressure.'

'All right. Think of your pressure.' Thickthorne was leaning forward eagerly. 'But not just of a gentle squeeze. Not just of your urban gasometer. As liquid – that's how gas should travel.'

'It does – in a small way.'

Thickthorne nodded. It was almost a conspiratorial nod.

'And in a middling way, too,' he said. 'You know it's already coming in in tankers – while English coal is still shunted about on these idiotic railways? I tell you, I'm going to *stop* coal. I'm going to *stop* railways. I'm going to have all the coal that's mined running through pipes like water from Land's End to John o' Groats.'

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'That's fine,' Phil said. He had decided that Mark Thickthorne really was pretty mad. 'Just how do you begin? Buy a coal-mine, I suppose?'

'Oh, but I've got that – or at least my father has. We sit on the stuff, as it happens. Only there's a lot of law to cope with. And, meanwhile, these unspeakable railways go on. For passenger transport, they're unutterably absurd. Do you realize, for instance, that we can't get off the things when we want to? And yet we're not in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. We're on the surface of a perfectly ordinary bit of England.'

'But your vertical take-off aircraft wouldn't be. And I don't believe even your monorail ...'

'Well, I'm going to *stop* the railways. And that reminds me.'

Thickthorne, who had been getting more and more excited, stood up as he spoke, crossed the compartment, and vigorously wrenched down the communication cord.

'Every now and then,' he said, 'I do *that* for a start.'

Phil stared aghast at his new acquaintance.

'What you do that for?' he asked. 'Cost you five pounds, it will. Showing off, I call it.'

'Showing off?' Thickthorne was indignant. 'It's a demonstration. Isn't that the first thing needed, when there's a deadweight of inertia against you?' As he spoke, this strange young man was pitched backwards upon the seat. The train had braked violently, and was now slowing down with an effect of comprehensive shuddering.

'Inertia?' Phil said. 'They'll tell you about inertia when they get along here. Dislocates the schedule, a thing like that does. And did you say you done it *before*?'

Thickthorne nodded – vigorously but at the same time just a shade uncertainly.

'Well, yes,' he said. 'It comes on me, to tell you the truth. All this obstruction put up against a perfectly rational plan. It makes me wild. They've no common sense.'

'Common sense!' Phil found himself speaking with robust pity. The guard, he supposed, would be along within a couple of

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minutes. 'It won't be just five pounds, either – not if you done it before.'

'That's true. As a matter of fact, the beak was a bit ratty last time. Anti-gas, I thought. Called me a gas-bag, I remember. Said he'd know how to deflate me if it happened again.'

'He'll put you inside, if you ask me.' Phil said this with a certain satisfaction. Hadn't he plenty to think about without getting mixed up with a young idiot blowing his top like this? But he looked at Thickthorne and saw that he wasn't scared. He was just one for doing a damned fool thing when it came to him. Which was all right, after all. 'Here,' Phil said, 'you get down on the floor. Between the seats – quick.'

'No good trying to hide. They know it's this compartment.' Thickthorne pointed at the depending communication cord, which hung in a loop over the corridor window. 'Simple as that.'

'I'm not suggesting you hide. Do like I say.' The train was now at a standstill, and they only had seconds. 'You're ill – see? Scared me, it did. And I lost my head.'

'Rubbish! I can't have you . . .'

Phil heard steps and voices in the corridor. The cramped space in the compartment made things difficult. Nevertheless he managed it – a kind of rugger tackle that would have done justice to the sodding playing-fields of Eton. Thickthorne went down with an angry shout which was quickly stilled. Very fortunately, his head had come a crack on the farther door. And Phil stooped and in a flash wrenched off his collar and tie.

'What's this, please – an accident?'

The guard had opened the corridor door. There was a ticket-collector behind him, and some curious passengers from nearby compartments behind that. Phil, because he was kneeling beside Thickthorne and squinting under his own arm, at first saw all these people upside down. Even so, he could see the men were looking wary rather than fierce. When this sort of thing happened, no doubt they had it in the back of their minds that they might be dealing with a homicidal maniac. This gave Phil, at the start, what you might call a psychological advantage. But

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he must hold on to it. He remembered his clothes. They were an advantage too. But of course they had to be backed up.

'Taken suddenly ill,' Phil said in an Oxford Varsity Voice. 'My friend Mr Honeycombe. I was very alarmed. He's unconscious now. I thought it was a stroke.'

'Well, sir, it would have been better to find me, or one of the dining-car men. No need to stop the train. The thing is to find a doctor among the passengers.' The guard peered past Phil at the recumbent Thickthorne. 'And we'll do that at once.'

'He's coming round, I think.' Phil looked anxiously at Thickthorne, who had been no more than dazed, and whose expression was becoming that of a man about to swear violently. Taking no risks, Phil lifted up Thickthorne's head and managed to give it another brisk crack against the door. 'Easing him up a bit,' he explained cheerfully. 'And I been remembering something now. Honeycombe does have these here fits. Harmless, like. Needn't have troubled you. Silly of me.'

The guard was now looking not too good. In fact he was looking suspicious and had got out a notebook and pencil. Phil was aware that his Oxford grammar hadn't quite matched up to his Oxford accent. You can't be thinking of everything. The turn he'd put on in the Pompadour only three days ago came into his head. That had been a neater job altogether. But at least the train was moving again. The ticket-collector must have gone and given some sort of signal. The train hadn't lost more than five minutes. The magistrate, if the thing came into court, might be a bit lenient on account of that.

'Must try to find a doctor, all the same,' the guard said. 'We have a routine we must carry out, sir, in matters of this sort. If there's no doctor, we'll try water. Dashed on him, like.'

'I'll see you damned first!' With deplorable suddenness and vigour, Thickthorne had sat up. 'Keep your rotten water to raise steam with. You need all you can manage, in an obsolete set-up like this.'

'Easy, sir, easy.' The guard was now clearly wondering whether he had to do with drunks.

'A bit delirious,' Phil said. 'But it passes off in no time. Unless - that's to say - Mr Honeycombe gets excited. A doctor would

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be fatal Produce a real stroke, as likely as not You see, Mr Honeycombe's a Christian Scientist He won't have anything to do with the medical profession' Phil glanced at Thickthorne and saw, just in time, that he was about to utter again He managed to give him a vigorous punch in the pit of the stomach 'But he allows a bit of massage,' he said 'Like this' He gave another disabling jab 'And now you'd better have his name and address'

'His name and address!' The guard could be heard breathing heavily, so that Phil was able to conjecture that he was now in a hopeful state of confused indignation 'May I take it, sir, that *you* admit pulling that there communication cord?'

'Well, yes – lost my head a bit I suppose But it was Mr Honeycombe that fell ill So it's *him* you want particulars of'

'You'll allow me to make up my own mind about that Your name and address, if you please, sir'

Phil provided this information with candour The train was running at normal speed again The little group of passengers behind the guard had faded away Thickthorne, who appeared to have been adequately winded, had got up on a seat and lay back gasping

'Shall I give you Mr Honeycombe's?' Phil asked 'No need to trouble him As you see, his breath comes a bit short after he has a turn'

'Nobody's going to be troubled in this affair but *you*, Mr Tombs' The guard put away his notebook grimly 'And fined you'll be – mark my words'

Phil, thus assured of substantial victory, wondered whether this was a moment at which to produce a handsome bribe He decided against it

'Oh, I say!' he said, still remembering the Oxford Varsity Voice 'What else was I to do, with poor old Honeybunny going black in the face? Have a heart, man There'll be an awful row if I'm had up in court – for being a giddy idiot, you know The old pater will hate it Far more than if I'd been had up for painting the town red He used to do that himself, not half he didn't' Phil paused hopefully The old pater seemed to him an invention so sublime as to be virtually irresistible. And

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it did, at least, get results. The guard was looking at Phil, and at Phil's clothes, in a new way. It was rather as if he was looking first at the one and then at the other. He scratched his jaw with the stub of his pencil. And then his features relaxed.

'All right,' he said. 'Forget it.' He tapped the pocket into which he had put the notebook. 'I'll bring it in as a genuine error of judgement, as you might say. And I dare say you'll hear no more of it, son.'

The guard was gone. The corridor was shut. Phil, if rendered a little thoughtful for a moment by the last word addressed to him, was able to take a large breath of air. He turned towards his companion, and was surprised to see that Thickthorne had managed to get to his feet and was rummaging in a suitcase.

'And now,' Thickthorne said conversationally, 'there's something I'd like to show you. Only rough plans, I'm afraid – but at least they're a start. My grand project. British Omnigas. I can just run over my sketch for the plant before we get to Paddington. I'd appreciate your common-sense view.'

'And thank you very much,' Mark Thickthorne said – rather unexpectedly – as they parted on the platform. 'You were quite right, you know. You took, if I may say so, a thoroughly down-to-earth view of the matter. I just haven't time to do a stretch in jug. We must meet again. There's the whole problem of colonial markets.'

'Yes – perhaps we might get chinning about that one day.' Phil hadn't very steadily attended to Thickthorne's further gassing away. He'd had what lay ahead of him to think of. But he found he liked the chap himself – as you often find yourself doing with somebody you've treated rough. So he was very ready to part on terms of great cordiality. 'See you some more,' he said.

'Just a minute.' Thickthorne was rummaging in bulging and untidy pockets. He produced a crumpled scrap of pasteboard and handed it to Phil. 'Always find me through that.'

'Thanks a lot.' Without much regarding it, Phil thrust the scrap away. He was rather wondering about tubes and taxis.

## Chapter Ten

HE'D better, he decided, arrive in a taxi – for mightn't she be looking out of a window and judge him lacking in spirit if he simply trudged up on foot? But this was an instance of thinking big which didn't, he found, wear well. He was hardly inside his cab – which smelt of dust and imitation leather and stale tobacco and stale scent – before he realized that here had been a kind of calculation not indulged in by those who go at all confidently about their affairs. Peter Sharples's mind wouldn't have worked that way, nor the mind of the engaging madman, Mark Thickthorne. And there was the fact, too, that this means of transport wasn't going to give him much time to decide what to do. For he still hadn't decided. All that about piping liquid gas across England had been distracting. It had even been interesting, if rather crazy. He'd like – it occurred to him – to read it up a bit. But he had another job on hand now.

His only excuse for turning up was Prendick's offer to give him personal advice about the money. So he'd have to make a move to get at Prendick, using some version of that 'Attention C.D.' gambit, and then hope that this would result in his contacting the girl called Jean. It was something you saw happening in films: chaps making a pass at secretaries on their way in to see an executive. Not that his idea was what you could call a pass. He didn't know *what* it was, but it wasn't exactly that. He remembered a chap he'd worked with who had got ill and died after days believing he was a car on an assembly line. This was like that: being trundled along mysteriously, without having much say in the matter. It wouldn't be happening if the money hadn't happened. Perhaps it was just an example of the danger of the general situation: the money doing things with him when he thought he was doing things with the money.

But at least, as the taxi drew up, his heart was thumping. Suddenly, in fact, he was so frightened that it was almost like he might be sick. And, queerly, it was at the same time a

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moment of pure joy. He was alive all right. He'd be alive even if the money clobbered him.

'I want to see Mr Prendick,' Phil said.

He spoke to a little chap in a uniform. He wasn't exactly the kind you call a commissionaire, with a belt and a smart white pouch for carrying messages in. This chap was dressed as silly as you could think, in a long brown frock coat and a brown silk hat, like he was just going to walk out into the Strand and drive away a coach and four. The place itself was all black glass, with a little fountain making a noise, and a couple of marble statues with no harm in them, except that they were under a concealed lighting which managed to make them look like dirty post-cards. It was a big place and the building was enormous. But coming in Phil had seen that half of it was empty; there had been a notice offering you superb prestige accommodation by the cubic foot. Of course the real business didn't happen here. You kept the prestige for yourself, and the hundreds of girls on the pools did their endless job in some less classy locality.

'Got an appointment, I suppose?' the porter said offhandedly. Phil had dropped the Oxford Varsity Voice, and the porter was taking his cue accordingly.

'No - no appointment,' Phil said. 'But Mr Prendick's always willing to see me. Name of Tombs.'

The porter looked at Phil sudden and sharp, so that for a moment Phil made the reasonable guess that his name had rung a bell. But it seemed it wasn't so, for the porter became even more casual than before.

'I'll see if anything can be done,' he said. 'You can sit down, if you like.'

Phil, judging this to be uncivil, remained standing. So he saw the little porter retreat into a sort of glass box he had and pick up a telephone. He began dialling a number, and Phil walked away. He wasn't any longer feeling frightened, but something was making him feel puzzled instead. He didn't know what. He looked at one of the statues and confirmed that it was a rose-coloured light that made it look the way it did. High-class



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brothels, he told himself sagely, have them like that. He turned back and saw the porter still at his telephone. It was odd he had so much to say. But now the man put down the receiver, opened a glass panel in his box, and spoke more politely than he had done before.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Bit of a hold-up.' He picked up another instrument, and this time spoke more briefly. Then he came back into the hall. 'Managing Director's in conference,' he said. 'Just a manner of speaking, that is. Mayn't be in today at all. Has his own entrance, of course. But his secretary can see you, if you care to go up.'

Phil's heart gave a jump and then fell to pounding again. It had worked out just like he wanted it. Unless – the thought came to him with sudden dismay – a chap like Prendick had bags of secretaries, and this one wouldn't be the girl.

'I don't mind if I do,' he heard himself say – and added: 'Lady, is it?'

'Miss Canaway. Some sort of relation of Mr Prendick's.' The porter glanced sideways at a flash clock let into one of the slabs of black glass. 'Helpful, you'll find her, Mr Tombs. Perfect lady, but affable-like. Don't you mind taking up a bit of her time. She'll like you, see?'

Phil didn't know whether to take this kindly in the way of honest benevolence or to be a bit high about it. But the porter had pressed a button and suddenly a kid appeared that might have been one of the Griffins back home, only he was dressed as a page, the kind you see in advertisements for cigarettes.

'Gentleman for Miss Canaway,' the porter said importantly, and the kid led Phil into a lift. It was his breathing as well as his heart now, and even his knees weren't feeling too good. Perhaps the acceleration of the lift didn't help; it was the kind from which you can't see anything moving outside, but Phil was able to guess they were shooting straight to the top of the building. Then before he knew it he was out in a corridor, and the kid had opened a door and piped out 'Mr Tombs' in a kid's voice, and the door had shut behind his back and there was the girl looking at him.

For a moment he'd wondered if it *was* her, for of course for

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days she'd been changing in his mind as he imagined her, and now here she was as she had been right at the start. But the first thing he did was to look at her eyebrows to see if they did nearly come together, the way he hadn't noticed when he'd actually been seeing her. And they did. He made sure of this and then he looked away from her in confusion – but not in such confusion that he didn't take in her surroundings in a way that made him gasp inside himself. The whole wall behind her was glass and one looked through it at the Thames and half London. And near each end of it, so that she was framed in this way too, was a great silver bowl filled with roses. But Jean herself – Jean Canaway – was just like she had been in his auntie's front kitchen: alert and in control of things like he'd never seen a girl – but besides that just having everything. There were those eyes and the way she looked at him straight with them; there was the mystery of how she could dress so plain and yet have you raving at it; and above all there was her figure that it would be blasphemy to start reckoning the statistics of the way he'd sometimes done with girls.

'Good morning, Mr Tombs. We wondered whether you'd come to see us.' She was standing behind a desk, and now she made some quite slight movement that somehow had Phil sitting opposite to her as she sat down again. 'Mr Prendick isn't in this morning, I'm afraid. But I can call up the head of our advisory service in a moment.'

'Thanks,' Phil said, 'but I don't want him.'

'I see. Then we must make an appointment with Mr Prendick for another time.' The girl – Jean Canaway – was smiling in a brisk professional way that made Phil's bumping heart sink. And she was poised a pencil over a desk diary. Probably dealing with blundering oafs like himself was routine with her. And he knew – he quite absolutely knew – that if he let her make a single pencil note about him he was done for.

'What I want,' he said, 'is for you to come out with me.'

Jean put down her pencil. It made a click on the desk like some fine piece of machinery adjusting itself to a new situation. Then there was a second's silence, with Phil wondering in what particular way the skies were going to fall. She was looking at

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him – perhaps clothes and all – without any change in that brisk smile. Or had her breathtaking eyebrows, he wondered, risen a shade, as if acknowledging some fantastic possibility? Then, astoundingly, she was not looking at him but at her watch.

‘That’s very nice of you,’ she said. ‘Now?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said through panic. ‘To lunch.’ He didn’t try to make the unfamiliar word come familiarly from him. ‘Will you?’

She put back her head – but not too far back – and laughed – but not too loud or long.

‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘that I’ve sat here for ages and ages dealing with people to whom this firm has handed out fortunes, and that you are the first properly grateful one among them? It’s entirely delightful of you. Of course I’ll come.’

Phil stood up. He felt that it might help to get his head above the waters that seemed to be flowing over it. But, even on his feet, he was still well out of his depth. Jean, if she had ceased to be a dream, had become a mystery. Her voice had quick shifts of pitch and colour that were like a code he’d been born without the key to. Her smile, that seemed so frank, had him guessing like it might have been the Mona Lisa’s in the picture shops.

‘Then come on,’ he said. Not knowing how to proceed, he spoke as if he was giving Beryl an order. And he saw that Jean was amused. ‘Only,’ he said, ‘you’ll have to be my advisory service about where we go and what we eat – see? I been in a flash restaurant once, and that was the day before yesterday.’

Her amusement, which seemed entirely friendly, turned to curiosity which seemed not less so.

‘How did it go?’ she asked.

‘It couldn’t have gone better. I was with a nice chap – undergrad friend of mine.’

‘So *this* can’t go better?’ She was mocking now, but in a way that made his head swim in admiration of her. ‘I expect I can improve on the restaurant, even if I can’t on the company. If, that is, you have enormous sums of money to pay the bill with.’

‘I got a little under a quarter million pounds,’ Phil said. ‘And I’m ready to get through it all along with you.’

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There was another moment's silence. It hadn't sounded as he meant it to sound: a bit of chaff like you might have with any girl, and seeming to mean no more than about paying for a meal unless you cared to hear it different. So he was confused again and looked away from her at one of the big silver bowls with its massed roses.

'Nice show of flowers you have here,' he offered with false affability. 'Posh vases, too.' He saw the flicker of a frown on her face, as if she saw in the simple awkwardness of this something that required more thinking about than the real brashness of his last remark.

'I can't say the firm's idea of décor for secretaries charms me,' Jean said. She spoke quickly, and he realized that she was making out, with all the tact of a princess, that that flicker hadn't been on account of him talking like a young proletarian. 'I'd call it studied – and pretty vulgar.'

'I wouldn't know,' he said. He knew that he had to defend himself with a bit of irony when it was needed.

'It's all under contract – and they send a smooth little man who says he creates arrangements to harmonize with my personality. I suppose he does the same with Uncle Arthur, for there are masses of flowers in his room too. A large-scale business like this is enormous fun in some ways. But one wouldn't call it precisely refined. If you're going to impress the million – and that's our job – you must develop a flair for being pretty brassy.'

'Ah,' said Phil, 'public means that public manners breeds.'

'What's that?' She was puzzled.

'Just Shakespeare,' Phil explained with cheerful offhandedness. 'Do you mean you'd like to be out of all this?'

'It's often vastly entertaining, as I say. But sometimes' – Jean paused and looked at Phil with an apparent seriousness behind which he sensed an enigmatic flicker of mischief – 'yes – I'd do almost anything to be shut of it.'

He almost leapt at this, although the turn of phrase was something he didn't quite take to. But an inner prompting made him tread cautiously.

'Did you say Uncle Arthur?' he asked. 'Is that Mr Prendick?'

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'Yes. He gives me a job. I'm a poor relation – one of quite a crowd of poor relations.' Jean paused for a moment. 'Have *you* a crowd of poor relations, Mr Tombs?'

'Only my aunt – her you saw on Friday. She's poor all right. Only she doesn't know she is. Lots are like that.'

'You have no parents – no brothers or sisters?' Jean's marvelously changing voice asked this almost tenderly. But at the same time it struck Phil that she had a businesslike turn for checking up. It was almost – some toughly rational part of his mind whispered to him – as if she were deciding that at least there would be no harm in having all the facts.

'No. I haven't got none of them.' And from some quite unfathomable impulse he added: 'But I got a girl.'

'How very nice.' She was looking at him with the largest candour, and when she framed another question he expected it to be something like, 'Is she dark or fair?'

'That you sleep with?' she asked in a clear tranquil tone.

Phil was dumbfounded. He felt himself flush hotly. He had a wild notion that he'd imagined the words or grotesquely distorted them, and that if he replied to them at all he would be fatally betraying himself.

'Yes,' he said.

'Ought I not to have asked?' She was all easy contrition. 'Different people have different ideas of what one *does* ask. My friends are all terribly frank.'

'I wouldn't ask *you*,' Phil said.

Now it was Jean who flushed – and glanced at him as if for the first time he'd really said something. At the same time there was a look about her that he'd have called brilliant – just as if she'd confirmed a sense of having wonderfully brought something off. Him, perhaps. After all, she'd be a fool if she didn't know by this time just where she had him.

'No,' she said. 'You haven't got *that* sort of frankness, thank God. So it wasn't fair. You see, it sometimes comes over me to behave like people in books. And say things like them. Sorry.' She was entirely gay over this queer confession. 'But I'm sure your girl is charming. And now, let's go. Just give me a minute to tidy up. Cigarettes in that box.'

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She vanished from the room – floating like an angel, he thought, past the piled-up roses that he now knew to be vulgar. He sat down and lit a cigarette, although he hardly knew he was doing it. It was a new world, all right, where a girl could ask you *that*. And talk about a mistress the way the word was used in the *Decameron*! But it hadn't cheapened her, as it often cheapens a girl to use some words men use, thinking to be smart and daring. It had only made her a little more he didn't quite know what. Teasing, certainly – but she wouldn't be her intoxicating self if she wasn't that. Virginal, perhaps – like the hunting one among the goddesses.

And she was coming out with him. He'd had a nerve – and it had paid off. Of course it needn't mean much with her, for she lived in a world that was all parties and casual sociabilities and nothing serious intended. She might just be curious about how he'd behave, and be feeling she'd have something amusing to tell those terrible frank friends. Or she might be thinking of him as a bit of market research for Prendick, and finish off by briskly filling him in on a form like a social worker's. Still, he'd got where he'd never thought, hadn't he? It was up to him now, it was.

Phil stubbed out his cigarette, straightened his homespun tie, and then found that she was in the room again. She'd put on a hat and was carrying gloves, but she still had the same dazzling simplicity. He came across the room to her like she was a magnet, and he knew she was noticing how he walked. It was something, surely that a social worker wouldn't bother to get round to. He felt exultant as they dropped down in the lift.

The porter was in his glass box. Phil had an odd impression that he didn't look too pleased when he saw the girl step out of the lift along with her visitor. And he had a further odd impression of seeing somebody in a bowler hat who quite suddenly wasn't there after all – rather as if he'd ducked abruptly out of sight. But naturally he wasn't thinking of much except Jean. In a minute they were climbing into a taxi.

'Tell him where to go,' he said. He still just didn't, he noted with satisfaction, feel the least awkward about not knowing things. Poor old Kipps.

## Chapter Eleven

YET at first he wondered how they could possibly *talk*. Again it wasn't that he felt awkward. The restaurant Jean chose wasn't, he saw at once, an out-and-out grand one, in spite of what she'd said. He was realizing now that she wasn't just the simplest lover's dream, not by a long way. There was a lot of devil to her, and she wouldn't be one to settle down, as good as gold, on the other side of the fireplace. But that was all right by him. He had enough gold, hadn't he? And he didn't want a life spent counting his blessings. He'd rather be kept guessing by this girl – who was like quicksilver, he thought, or a landscape perpetually transforming itself under sunshine and scudding cloud.

They drank Chianti and ate risotto – and he noticed that Jean ate as much as he did, as if divinely confident that that figure had been given her for keeps and from heaven. So it went fine, their eating together.

But talking didn't seem to prove a difficulty after all, and his mind as stiff as the table napkin it had taken him some research to get unfolded. He imagined her mind like that too. He imagined her searching round among all the things she usually talked about to find something about which she could talk to *him*. She'd have to reject a lot of them as being above his head – or his station as the old books had it. And others, it seemed, as being too frank – which was certainly a queer one. Like if you went to some very strange country, and did somehow know the bare language, but everything was so different from your own country that you didn't know what to turn the language to.

But talking didn't seem to prove a difficulty after all, and his spirits rose steadily all through the risotto.

'Do you feel,' she'd asked as soon as their meal was ordered, 'that you could do ever so much more if only it were double?'

'Double?' He'd taken a moment to get it. But even before he'd understood her he was rejoicing at the way warmth mingled with a faint mockery in her voice. The voices he was

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accustomed to, he thought, just didn't have this power of blending shades. 'No,' he said, 'I haven't been feeling that way, I haven't. Perhaps I haven't got what they call wide horizons. A quarter of a million seems just the job to me. Mind you, I'd like to have earned it – earned it by an invention or something. There would be more salt to it then, you might say. As it is, I've got to get the salt later, like. Use what's come tumbling at me some way a man can take satisfaction in. But I'm not quarrelling with the amount. Enough for one, anyhow.' Phil hesitated. Then, made bold by that warmth he'd heard in her question, he went on. 'Might even be enough for two.'

'Yes, of course,' she said – now sweet and candid. 'You'll be able to get married, won't you? How very nice.'

This came at him so sudden it was like the flick of a whip. He managed to take it smiling.

'Would you want double?' he asked.

'Certainly. And I think you will one day. When you start using your fortune on that man-sized job you'll think it isn't half enough.'

'Does everybody the pools come home on feel like that?'

'Gracious, no. They buy a villa – semi-detached, so as not to be awkwardly conspicuous. They have a holiday on the Continent – in a coach, so that they're with their own kind. Then a lot go on working. If they're middle-aged, the whole business usually passes off harmlessly enough. The chief sufferers are the children. Whatever their age, the parents assume the absolute advantageousness of buying them the most expensive sort of upper-class education at once. Oddly enough, it can't always just be bought – or not in a hurry. So a great deal of bewilderment and frustration may result. But the idea is wholesome enough, and one's general conclusion is that ordinary people are entirely sane – although in the way of enterprise their bolt's soon shot. But it's the extraordinary and insane ones that are interesting.'

'Who are they?' Phil was lost in admiration that even a divinity could talk with this unfaltering ease.

'You, me, and anybody we'd find it fun to go around with.' She looked straight into his eyes, and then held out her glass.



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to be filled. And there was something in her doing these two things together that sent him almost crazy.

'Do you think that the two of us . . .' he began.

'You see,' she said, laughing and not letting him go on, 'you're an inordinate person, Mr Tombs. Don't you want the moon?'

'I've had thoughts of it,' Phil said. He was remembering the startling suggestion of George Pratley.

'I'm sure you have. You're prepared to make a bold bid for the inconceivable, aren't you? It's the way to get it – sometimes.'

'And you?' he asked. He wondered if the way he felt he was going was what they called swooning.

'Oh, yes – I'm inordinate. I want everything double and twice over. Two lives, for instance.'

'Kind of a double life?' Soon, he realized, his mind would stop working. Already he wasn't being too bright. He'd had a confused notion she was proposing bigamy.

'Good heavens, no!' Jean shook her head with a vigour that set her mouth – her adorable mouth – swaying hazardingly behind her uplifted fork. She could behave just anyhow, he saw, and remain triumphantly elegant. 'I want only one me. I hate books that credit us with multiple lives lived at sundry levels. You know? Part One, Amaryllis as for years I believed her to be. Part Two, Amaryllis as Jasper knew her. Part Three, Amaryllis's spiritual journal. Part Four . . .'

'I get the idea,' Phil said. She did seem to have books in her head.

'I want just one life at a time – and a great deal of it. Everything love can give and everything money can buy.' She put back her head, and what he thought he saw was a flash of real mockery. 'Then another lifetime to follow on. And probably a third. After that, I'd perhaps be willing to call it a day. What do you think' – her voice dropped, lingered – 'Mr Tombs?'

'I think,' he said, 'what won't happen isn't worth wishing for, it isn't. It's one life and then curtains, so we got to fill it up all we know how. Without hankering after any reincarnation stuff. Being alive just once is a bloody miracle. Why, you

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must be missing things! You must be feeling life slipping past you, like, if you talk morbid about what's given us real and solid not being enough.'

He saw her eyes rounding on him. He supposed it was because, being excited, he'd used words that weren't proper. But he *was* excited now – so why conceal it?

'Sorry,' he said. 'But isn't it all here to take – if we just *will*? We're young. We're healthy. We're eager. We could get absolutely everything in.'

She was faintly flushed. He had a wild thought she was breathing quicker.

'Into one ball?' she said. 'All our strength and all our sweetness?'

He nodded, thinking again how she could talk, and how her voice could make things sound almost they were poetry.

There was a pause. Jean had put down her empty glass and was gazing into it.

'And tear our pleasures with rough strife,' she murmured, 'Through the iron gates of life . . . It's a terrifying image.' She glanced up, saw him looking puzzled, and smiled mischievously. 'Mr Philip Tombs,' she said, 'hauling a quarter of a million pounds, fortuitously acquired, through the iron gates of life. With one hand. And hauling along a protesting virgin with the other.'

He saw that she had what you might call pulled back sharply. That was the explanation of this mysterious mockery.

'Don't think,' he said, 'I don't see my quarter million as pretty funny.'

'Funny? It would at least run to another flask of Chianti. Or, alternatively, to brandy with the coffee.'

'Then it's brandy with the coffee.' Phil felt he'd scored by not saying, 'It will run to both.' And, remembering Saturday, he'd felt it was brandy would best lengthen out this incredible meal. 'And don't think,' he went on, 'I can't see that it may turn out too funny by half. What would you say – honest-like? Is a great pile of money coming like this to a chap like me just a curse?'

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'Well, that's not what I'm paid to think, is it?' She was cool and ironical now, and he asked himself if it could really be true that, only minutes ago, he'd got right under her guard 'My instructions are that your consistent enterprise in pursuing a sound investment policy has met with well-merited '

'Yes, I know And it's bleeding comic, it is, the way us suckers can be taken in But what are you really thinking? That the poor lad won't be able to save himself from drowning in the gravy? Lots think that '

'You really want an opinion?' She was looking her coolest now 'I think you will put up quite a fight But your wealth is more likely to change you for the worse, Mr Tombs, than for the better '

'Well, thanks,' he said 'It's a straight answer at least '

'Does it seem a terribly chilly one? I think I mean it rather warmly '

'Warmly?' He stared at her

'It wouldn't be terribly easy to change you for the better As human beings go my guess is that you're very tolerably satisfactory as you are One might have a shot at improving you - in rather superficial ways - and the results could be entirely lamentable Do you mind my talking like this? You asked for it '

'Go on,' Phil said He believed that she was now being quite serious

'Well, then, how permanent are we as people? What won't change inside us, if enough changes outside? Or put it this way do you believe that there's anything at all that you could never conceivably bring yourself to do in any circumstances whatever?'

'Yes A lot of things' Phil felt that at any minute he'd get confused He was as far as ever from a glimpse of how she felt about him But he didn't find the question she'd fired at him difficult

'Even,' she asked, 'if you became utterly cut off from your own past - utterly anonymous?'

'I don't get that ' He said this out of caution Obscurely, he felt he did.

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'Well, listen.' Jean leaned forward, so that across the little table her head was suddenly intoxicatingly close to him. He was aware, for the first time, of some ghost of a perfume that she carried. 'Last night,' she said, 'I was reading a novel – a novel about Alexandria.'

'That a queen?'

'No, no – it's a town in Egypt.' She didn't stop to be amused. 'And once a year they have a carnival, and they all dress up in absolutely obliterating disguises. Identity, age, sex – all utterly vanish beneath enveloping cowls and cloaks. And so, of course, conduct and action become a little irresponsible. But the point is that it's a state of affairs posing a philosophical problem. What do we shed when we put on anonymity? What's left? You say "I can imagine myself doing this" or "I can't imagine myself doing that". But what do you mean by "yourself"?''

'I've sometimes asked myself that,' Phil said. 'And it's a tough one any road.'

'I can tell you part of the answer. What you mean by "yourself" is something perpetually being recruited from your own familiar and habitual world, and perpetually being defined and controlled by other people's notions and expectations of you. So you see what I mean. Your conscience, your personality, mightn't be and work quite the same when inside a cowl and cloak. And any radical change of circumstances and environment and so on *is* a cowl and cloak. Mr Tombs stops making motor cars, or whatever it is he's been doing, and becomes one of the wealthiest young men in England. Can he conceivably be sure of anything he'd do or not do in six months' time?'

He had a queer feeling this was working up to a challenge – and that he'd better fling in a challenge of his own first. He gave a jerk to his neck so that the curl came down over his forehead.

'So what?' he said.

'Well – several things.' She was checked for a moment. 'Think of yourself as a proposition, Mr Tombs. Here you are – with your money in your pocket, and your wits about you,

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and your hair tumbling ravishingly into your eyes. Do you see what an unknown you are – say to a business man thinking of going into partnership with you? Not just an ordinary unknown, but a colossal one. You're nice, you're reliable – but you're adrift. What's your attraction? Just that a successful gamble – for the pools are that – has made you the biggest gamble in England.'

'You a gambler?' Phil asked.

Their faces were again close to each other. Her lips parted – and, for the first time, it seemed without any intention of speech. His instinct leapt to the recognition of crisis. He knew that he must have put into that brief question pretty well everything he'd got.

'At least I shall love to hear about you six months on – and then sixty.' Suddenly she was smiling brilliantly – and there was only the smile there. The thing was like a barrage put up to cover some expertly conducted retreat. 'Meanwhile, let's drink to what you're going to do – whatever it is.' She raised her glass.

'We've decided, haven't we? I'm going to fall into the gravy.' Phil was entirely bewildered now. For a wild moment he'd believed he was near the tape. Now he couldn't tell whether he'd as much as lapped the track once. And he had a feeling that he was about at the end of his stamina. It was as if all the muscles he had been using were unfamiliar ones. 'So we'll drink to that,' he said. 'That nice smell of sweat and machine oil disappearing beneath a nasty declassy stink.'

She sat back instantly.

'Have you any cigarettes?' she asked rather coldly.

He produced them, blushing.

'Give it a break,' he said. 'Mr Tombs and his money and all that.' He had drunk some of his brandy and was finding that today he didn't care for it. He didn't want his head to be the way brandy slightly made it – not when he was fighting like this to get some sense of where he was with her. 'Talk about you,' he said. 'Let's fill in the other side of the questionnaire. Anything *you* could never conceivably bring yourself to do in any circumstances whatever?'

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Jean blew out tobacco smoke delicately and then put back her head in that short low laugh.

'Yes,' she said 'Several things And they're all sharply physical I couldn't use cheap scent I couldn't stroke velvet or sit on plush And, yes' – she narrowed her eyes with a deliberation that obscurely troubled him – 'there are certain kinds of men I couldn't marry'

'What kinds of men?' Phil heard himself ask it very straight, without false casualness

'Yellow men, black men, enormously fat men, hunchback men, and clergymen.'

'That all?'

'Yes, that's all Apart from these, I'd – well, I'd have an open mind.'

There was a bit of a silence – the first that there had been so that you'd really notice it Phil knew it was because he hadn't said something like 'Am I plush, or will you marry *me*?' He'd been invited – as suddenly as if it was in a book or a play – to put up some fast-working, whirlwind lover stuff But he'd said nothing And, ever so fleetingly, they'd looked at each other with a sort of guilty recognition before Jean Canaway went talking gaily on

He tried blaming himself for just being slow on the draw. Yet he knew that wasn't right He hadn't made a mistake in that surprising moment, even although he knew that she'd challenged him to ask what he hadn't asked And now his blood was doing funny things in his head When you want a girl, and she wants you to say so, and something holds you so that you just don't say it – well, something's badly wrong He tried to persuade himself he'd been thinking of Beryl But that – no doubt shamefully – simply wasn't true The real truth was the painfully obvious one that Jean had just been amusing herself If he'd said something – well, she'd have gone home and cut another notch on a stick. Something like that.

Face it, he told himself – and slowly felt the blood behaving better in his temples If she'd flirted with him right up to that about clergymen and hunchbacks, hadn't he asked for it –

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shoving in like he had? And if she hadn't for an instant taken him seriously, wasn't it to her credit – considering he'd been pretty well flourishing a quarter of a million pounds at her like she was a dateless shopgirl? And hadn't there been that about his blurting out to her the truth about him and Beryl? No – she couldn't be blamed if she'd planned to take him down a peg by getting him to ask her straight out if she'd marry him. And as he'd sheered off in time they'd better call it honours easy.

Over the ruins of their meal, Phil managed all this good sense and cold reason with himself – even though it wasn't what his heart was feeling.

'It's been very nice of you,' he said. 'To come out like this. But you'll be wanting to go back. I'll get a bill.'

'It's been such fun.' She said this in a more conventional way than anything she'd said before. But at the same time she was looking at him with a faint dismay that almost made him feel he'd got it utterly wrong. But he hadn't. His body told him that now – just as if its whole surface was a thermometer registering undeniably the fatal lack of the one vital thing. Perhaps she'd been amused and interested, with no thought of humiliating him until he'd gone too far. But what *counted* – well that just wasn't there. He wasn't perhaps plush or velvet, or a hunchback or a black. But he wasn't the positive thing either. There was nothing more to be said. He reached across the table and handed her her gloves.

'Well, thanks a lot,' he said steadily. 'I'd like to have this every day.' He got to his feet, smiling. He was beaten and he knew it. But he'd cover up his chin and spar out the round. 'I'll take you back to that office.' He almost added: '– where you'll be wanting to fix next week's winner.' But that would be silly. 'I got plenty to learn,' he said more lightly. 'Chianti, risotto: I'll remember them.'

He thought she was going to say it would be nicer if he said he was going to remember *her*. But she didn't. Perhaps she turned it down as a bit cheap. Instead, she looked at him uncertainly. It was the first time she'd done that. And then they went out.

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There was a crush of smart people dithering on the pavement. Phil snapped up a taxi from under their noses – and didn't hardly raise his voice in doing it. He didn't want to pretend he knew about the world, but he had no notion of not showing he would be a quick learner if he wanted to. But they hadn't sat down before she jumped on just this.

'Think of all that money dished out on what's the next thing to blind chance,' she said. 'And yet of its going to somebody with a whole life in front of him – just as you said, Mr Tombs – and a good brain and fast reaction times and a lot else as well. You don't mind my telling you you're intelligent?'

He was going to say 'Not if you don't mind my telling you you're beautiful.' But he rebelled. She was looking at him brilliantly again, and he thought brutally that she was just snatching the fun of another round in which she could do all the punching. So he said nothing. And when she spoke again it was almost nervously.

'Intelligent people are usually highly assimilative. I'm not sure – it's really what I was trying to say – that the assimilative Mr Tombs won't come out on top of the Mr Tombs who's all rugged independence.'

'All right,' Phil said. 'We've had it, haven't we?'

Amazingly, she put out a hand and laid it for a moment firmly on his arm.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I've muddled this. You're not going to see me again, and you'll remember me as a common little bitch. Damn!'

'No, I shan't! Don't you go saying such a thing!' In a gesture he didn't know about, he put his hand on hers and quickly took it away again. 'It's just that we haven't much in common, isn't it? I don't get your wave-length right. I keep guessing, and guessing wrong.' He was incoherent and passionate. 'But we might go places yet. Jean – mightn't we?'

'Here we are.' She said it with a gasp as the taxi drew to the kerb. 'But no, Mr Tombs – Phil – just no. There would be something impossible about it. Something missing.'

'Class – education: all that?'



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'Yes ... no ... something simpler ... I don't know But I just know. Don't you see?'

It was she who was incoherent now He tumbled out of the taxi after her, just remembering to thrust a couple of half-crowns at the driver She went straight into the building, and was standing by the lift before he reached her.

'Look,' he said, 'we can't ...'

She was holding out her hand – and he saw, to his final confusion that, although pale, she was calm and smiling again.

'Least said, soonest mended,' she said 'Good-bye'

He found that he had shaken hands – and that she was gone. Where Jean Canaway had been a moment before there was now only Phil Tombs, mirrored in a softly closing panel of black glass He was still staring at this when a voice – the voice of the little porter – spoke respectfully behind him

'Mr Tombs, sir? Associate of the Managing Director's just stepped in to contact you'

## *Chapter Twelve*

IT wasn't a moment, naturally, at which Phil Tombs wanted to be contacted by anybody He could still feel Jean's hand on his arm – and *that* was a contact which was never going to happen again But his defeat had roused something he owned rather a lot of, which was either pride or vanity, and he wouldn't for anything have shown himself as being as battered as he felt himself to be So he turned round from that horrible glass panel that had closed on his dream girl with a softness like it was the door of a convent, and he tried to give at least an appearance of attention to what was happening behind him.

A man in a bowler hat was advancing on him – with the little porter, sharp-eyed, hovering behind He was carrying – the man in the bowler was – a very tightly rolled umbrella, and a very neatly folded copy of *The Times*, and a very lemon-coloured pair of gloves The gloves didn't look like they were meant to be put on, or the umbrella to be hoisted, or *The Times* to be read. The bowler, for that matter, didn't seem to be made

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to take off. But that was a mistake – for off it came now with quite a flourish. And the chap managed to hold it and *The Times* and the umbrella and the gloves all elegantly in his left hand while stretching out his right to Phil in a gesture like Comrades in Arms on an old cigarette card. For that matter he was about as military as you could imagine, and when he spoke it was in a voice like an affable Brigadier.

‘My dear Mr Tombs, I am quite delighted to meet you. I don’t know whether my name has actually been mentioned to you? Hannay – Colonel Hannay.’ And Colonel Hannay, introduced himself like this and still pumping Phil’s arm, looked keenly into Phil’s face like a scientist in an advert peering at a test tube. Then his expression changed – just as if you’d turned over the page, Phil thought, and come on a retired ambassador saying he’d never raised a whisky was a sodding patch on this one. ‘Very lucky to get wind of each other – eh?’ Hannay nodded his well-groomed head and manufactured kindly wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. ‘I think we’ll have a lot to discuss.’

‘Afternoon,’ Phil said. ‘You one of this Prendick’s lot?’ He was still feeling rather dazed.

‘Not precisely, my dear sir.’ Hannay smiled like he wasn’t being offended by the ignorance of the young. ‘It’s rather a matter of my group of – um – enterprises being pretty closely associated with his. Arthur and I hold a good many directorships in common. That sort of thing, you know. I’d say we were pretty closely identified in the eyes of the City.’ As he said this, Colonel Hannay sent his own eyes sweeping rapidly round the large hall, so that Phil was faintly reminded of a bookie’s runner making sure there wasn’t any spot of trouble coming down the street. ‘Yes, we’ve had our fairly spectacular occasions, Arthur Prendick and I. Not of course spectacular in any sensational or undesirable sense, I need hardly say. Keen business methods, naturally. But the fact is that one has heavy public responsibilities, Tombs, when one operates on our scale. We have to put the national interest first, you know. We work in pretty closely with the Government, as a matter of fact. Yes, that sort of thing.’

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'Mr Prendick been telling you about me?' Phil asked. He couldn't quite get round to seeing how all this tied up.

'That sort of thing,' Colonel Hannay said largely. 'Now, shall we drop into my own office for our talk? It might interest you. We ran up our own fifteen storeys only a few weeks ago. Rather like this, as a matter of fact.' And Colonel Hannay gestured round his associate Prendick's glassy hall. 'But perhaps a little more refined,' he added. 'A rather more definite touch of artistic distinction. As masters of industry and heads of finance, we must acknowledge a certain responsibility to the arts, and so forth. I was saying so only the other day to the President of the Royal Academy. He was extremely pleased. They're always deuced grateful for a word of recognition, you know, fellows of that sort. It's something to remember, Tombs. So let's go straight along, shall we?'

Phil had no great notion of going along. But then he hadn't, at the moment, any great notion of anything. He glanced from Colonel Hannay to the porter – there was something about the two of them that he didn't quite get – and decided that he liked the porter even less than the Colonel. So he decided to get out of Prendick's place, and that he might as well see what this talkative chap was up to. An ache was growing in Phil like the sort that comes some time after a wound, and he felt that if he didn't have something to use his head on he might get round to banging it against a wall.

'O K.,' Phil said. 'I'm ready to blow.' He found himself wishing he was in his jeans and that – for there was something about Hannay that put you out of love with disguises. 'Walk, can we?'

'My dear sir, one of my cars is outside.' Hannay, who had appeared shocked at Phil's last words, moved briskly towards the open air – not, it occurred to Phil, without a wary glance in the direction of the lift. 'I'm particularly anxious that you should meet McLeod. Colin McLeod – an old Scottish family, you know, although impoverished, decidedly impoverished – is my most reliable man. Sound judgement, great thingummy' – Hannay, with the hand that was carrying *The Times*, managed to snap a finger in quest of the word that had slipped –

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'probity, that is to say – all that sort of thing. Jump in, my dear fellow.'

Phil jumped in, although it seemed a disrespectful way of entering a car of such sombre splendour as the Colonel's. A touch or two here and there, and it would make a high-class affair for group burials some place where they had volcanoes and earthquakes. There was a chauffeur standing by the door holding a folded fur rug – which was what you might call a touch of ostentation on a warmish day. The chauffeur was very large and ugly and had a broken nose.

'Office, Hotchkiss,' Hannay said, as he got in after Phil. 'Yes,' he went on, 'I can guarantee you will like McLeod. A trifle dour perhaps, as our northern friends tend to be. But a dear fellow when you win his confidence. Personal relations are almost everything in business, you will find. Particularly at the level on which we operate. But I imagine it to be true in the lower and middle reaches as well. From what I hear, that is to say.'

'Beg pardon, sir,' Hotchkiss, who had laid the fur rug neatly on the floor as if it was for the convenience of a top-level dog, paused in the act of closing the door on his passengers. 'Are you thinking to find Mr McLeod at the office? Wasn't he to be lunching in the West End, sir? I have a notion Higgs drove him off there in the second Rolls.'

Colonel Hannay once more snapped his fingers.

'Stupid of me,' he said. 'Of course McLeod has been giving lunch at the Grand Excelsior to – um – the President of the Board of Trade.' He glanced at Phil. 'You know the present President?' he asked, like he was courteously ignoring that his guest was the next thing to a kid straight out of a slum. 'A good fellow – decidedly a good fellow. But a little awkward. Yes, slightly on the uncouth side. I'd hesitate to take him into White's. I'd baulk at dining him at – um – Boodle's. Simply because he might be uncomfortable, you know. One has to consider these things with a guest. Best to take a fellow like that to one of the big hotels. We'll probably be just in time to catch Colin there. All right, Hotchkiss – and I am obliged to you. The Grand Excelsior, as quickly as you can manage it.'

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This time Hotchkiss, who had got into the driving seat, gave a nod without turning. It was one of a number of small things that Phil found he was noticing. Another was Hotchkiss's ears, which looked as if they'd been thick like that for a long time, and another was Hotchkiss's neck, which looked as if it was engaged in getting thicker every day.

After a quick run the car stopped. Hotchkiss didn't get out this time, because there were a couple of chaps in scarlet uniforms and white gloves competing for the door. Phil saw at once that the Grand Excelsior – which was a name reminding him with a nasty jab of that rather pathetic scarf of Beryl's – was just the kind of de luxe place Jean hadn't taken him to. It had carpets you waded through, and palm leaves ready to tickle your neck, and if you went to the lavatory it would be a shilling down for a piss. Hannay led him straight in – the umbrella and the gloves all working like mad – and there was no difficulty at all in finding this other business gent, Mr Colin McLeod. Not that Phil didn't think at first that there might be. For Hannay had started chinning with a soft fat pewter-coloured type that could have been put together out of slightly deflated footballs that had been well booted round a greasy field. The last time Phil had seen that sort was on his National Service in Nicosia, and then he'd been told they were tourists from some place farther east – was it the Lebanon. But anyway this was Mr McLeod, because that was the way Colonel Hannay introduced him – and perhaps Phil ought to have been able to tell, old impoverished family and all, from the fact that he wore a tartan bow tie. Now McLeod shook hands with Phil, and it was as like handling that football as you wouldn't believe.

'Verra pleased to meet you – yes?' Mr McLeod said. He had an accent reking of kilts and heather. 'Richt guid luck you've been having – no?' He bobbed his head up and down, so that a lot of black hair on it stirred sluggishly. It was funny, Phil thought, the way he ended his sentences. Not like Ginger Grant, him of the Wee St George. But then Ginger's Scottish family, although no doubt impoverished, hadn't been an old one.

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McLeod had small feet in very pointed shoes, and his hands were much paler than his face and had small pudgy fingers with rings on them. And now he was turning with a sort of waddle on his small feet like he might be an out-of-condition penguin, and was pointing with his fat little hands at some bulging chairs round a little table in a corner of this white and gold and red lounge. There was coffee, and a box of cigars, and three of these enormous bubbles of glass with brandy again – so that it seemed just as if McLeod had been waiting for them. Phil looked at all this and had a dim feeling that things were coming a bit clearer in his mind. Colonel Hannay looked too, and appeared to think that comment was necessary.

‘Ah,’ he said in his satisfied Brigadier’s voice. ‘One of my secretaries must have got a message through to your secretary – eh, Colin my boy? So you’re prepared for us. Capital! And how did your little negotiation with the President go?’

A long white slit appeared in McLeod’s sludge-coloured face. He was beaming like as if he’d forgot that dour Scottish character he’d been born with.

‘Verra weel,’ he said – and as he sat down he rubbed his hands softly against each other in front of his stomach. ‘It was a graun’ meeting, Colonel, although I say it misel. The President laddie tipped the lines.’

‘Toed the line, did he?’ Hannay said loudly. ‘Very good, Colin. It’s no more than I expected of you. You said, I hope, that we’d close only at a round million?’

‘Aye – and wi’ commission. But ye’ll be after considering Mr Tombs’s affairs – yes?’ McLeod turned to Phil at this with a smile like he wanted to flog him a couple of carpets or some art photos. ‘You making investments, no?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Phil said. ‘I’m not making anything.’ He was going to add, following his earlier thought, ‘Not even water in a joint like this.’ But curiosity was pricking him. So he said only: ‘Nothing but inquiries, like, at the moment.’

‘Quite right!’ Hannay chimed in emphatically. ‘We have to proceed, my dear Colin, with the utmost circumspection. Tombs’s – um – funds are substantial, but they are not unlimited. We must be cautious. My old friend Arthur Prendick

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will expect it of us. It is a matter of finding openings. We must take the utmost advantage of our knowledge of the markets – of our top contacts and inside knowledge. That sort of thing.'

'Aye, we maun be canny, nae doot,' McLeod said – and added abruptly to Phil: 'Yes?'

'Yes.' Phil said.

McLeod nodded seriously. He picked up one of the glasses from the little table and raised it towards Phil.

'Jeers,' he said, and drank a considerable quantity of liqueur brandy.

'And jeers to you,' Phil said with a certain satisfaction. But he made no more than a pretence of sniffing at the brandy.

'The first question that comes into my mind,' Hannay said, 'is this. Shall we consult some of our more intimate associates at once? Colin, what do you think? Shall we run Tombs into the City and have a word with the Lord Mayor? A very sound fellow. A shade lacking in experience, perhaps, so far. But I have a great respect for his judgement.'

'Or the Governor of the Bank of England, no?' McLeod asked.

Hannay pursed his lips. He frowned. 'Ye-es,' he said doubtfully. 'But would you say that he is *quite* the man to bring in on this occasion? Of course, a certain respect is due to his position. Sooner or later, Tombs should be introduced to him. All that sort of thing. But – well, strictly between our three selves, is he altogether sound? I hold a certain reserve in the matter, I confess. Remember, my dear Colin, the unfortunate affair of the poor Duke's Hampshire estates. Consider that unlucky move over the corner in diamonds. Do they leave one's confidence in the Governor as unflawed, you know, as Tombs has a right to expect in regard to anybody we bring into conference in his affairs? Have a thought, Colin – have a serious thought.'

There was a moment's brooding silence. Phil looked at his brandy and decided the mere smell of it would make him sick. And then he looked at these two crooks. They weren't merely crooks. They were plodding, slow-motion crooks, putting in far too much time on the softening up. They needed prodding.

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Phil, knowing he was being crazy, suddenly sat up and looked fixedly and obtrusively over their shoulders.

'Odd thing, like,' he said. 'Why should there be a couple of plain-clothes dicks in that corner?'

The heads of both Hannay and McLeod swung round in an instant. And they so anxiously scrutinized the recesses of the lounge that Phil had no difficulty whatever in dividing his brandy precisely between their glasses. When their glance turned back to him he was looking rather wistfully into an empty bubble.

'I hardly think so,' Hannay said. His expression might have been described as one of dignified relief. 'Not that I have much acquaintance with that branch of the police, I need hardly say.' He picked up his glass and gulped largely. 'Colin,' he said reproachfully, 'you're not drinking. And Tombs's glass is empty.'

McLeod, whose muddy mug also expressed relief, answered this by picking up his own glass and draining it.

'Another brandy?' he asked Phil.

'Thanks a lot. I don't mind if I do.'

He'd spoken in the most off-hand way. And now he watched with satisfaction the arrival of the three further brandies. He was really beginning to enjoy himself. Which wasn't, perhaps, very nice. But – he thought to himself – what the hell? Wasn't he bloody but unclobbered? Wasn't he out for experiment? Well, he'd do a bit of experimenting now.

But Hannay and McLeod still went a bit slow. Phil – feeling wicked like he was – did his best to move them along. He gorged and gaped at anything they suggested. He asked fool questions, like he might be one of the Babes straight out of the Wood. But there must be something in him, he saw, that puzzled these two. Not that *he* wasn't puzzled by *them*. He wondered what, in the end, it was going to be that they'd try to sell him. Perhaps it would be the bleeding Spanish Armada, with its galleons bottomed with beaten gold, just asking to be dredged up somewhere off the west coast of Scotland. He'd heard of that one – and of the Crown Jewels of Imperial



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Russia, which could be infallibly traced on the expenditure of a mere ten thousand nicker. Or there were what you might call more prosaic baits: oilfields going cheap among ignorant blacks, and uranium some chap had noticed lying around when he was taking a stroll in central Australia, and the way to break the bank at Monte Carlo which could be explained to anybody it was really worth while to explain to. Yes, Phil had heard of all of them. But somehow he didn't think it was quite that sort of thing that was Hannay's and McLeod's line.

They were pretty smart, he thought as he listened, or didn't listen, to Hannay talking about cement. Having Prendick's porter in their pocket and nipping in on a sucker with this yarn that they were Prendick's pals – it was clever to have thought up that. Not a word of truth in it, he saw. A chap like Prendick, making a packet every week out of human folly – Phil Tombs's included – would be the last man to let himself venture within a mile of human crime. Not that these two need represent exactly what you'd call crime. He doubted whether they were con-men – that was the phrase – in the strict sense of the term. He had an idea they really had something solid to sell. But it wasn't cement.

It wasn't, for that matter, cement that Hannay was now talking about. He'd got on to roadhouses and country clubs. And McLeod – who was about as much a Scot, Phil had decided, as any other Wog type that had sailed in a fo'c'sle up or down the Clyde – McLeod was sitting quiet and observant like it might be warming up. And there wouldn't be any harm in applying a little more heat himself. He did this business of looking over their shoulders again.

'Why,' he said, 'if that isn't Prendick! Let's bring him in.'

It was a comedy, how they swung round on that one, and he could hardly keep a straight face when he said No, he'd made a mistake, and it was just a fellow like Prendick had gone straight through the lounge. Both their hands went out to their drinks like you'd expect, all right. Phil, of course, had done his pouring trick again. So in about thirty seconds there were three empty glasses on the table.

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'Another brandy, yes?' McLeod asked, mopping his brow with a handkerchief that matched his tie.

'Thanks a lot,' Phil said. 'One more would be just the job.'

### *Chapter Thirteen*

AND now they were surrounding him. Although there was only Hannay and this cheaper crook who called himself McLeod, that was how it felt—that he was in a little closing circle of knees and faces and brandy glasses, and with cigar smoke to breathe instead of air. Perhaps they were all alone now in this great gaudy cave of a lounge, or perhaps there was the same sort of dirty work going on in the other corners of it. Phil wouldn't know. He was in a queer sort of daze that had nothing to do with alcohol, and he'd have liked to know whether he was playing the crooks or the crooks were playing him.

'Them country clubs now,' he said with a yokel's gawp at Hannay, 'how would there be big money in them, like?'

Hannay grinned as if he was a teacher with a promising pupil coming on. His clock was still the affable Brigadier's, but you felt now that if you passed a sponge over it there'd be something quite different underneath. He still spoke like he was at his old pal the Lord Mayor's Banquet, but there was something in his voice that would make any Lord Mayor snap out an order for locking up the gold plate. As for McLeod, probity and Bonnie Scotland had faded out on him altogether. His voice had gone soft like the rest of him, and he was sweating as if he was back in Alexandra – no, Alexandria – or Port Said or whatever Wog place had vomited him.

'Money, undoubtedly. Whether there is still *big* money is gravely open to doubt.' Hannay, although his hand was shaking now, managed his weighty City manner. 'The fact is that people – substantial people – are more and more taking that sort of – ah – discreet holiday on the Continent.'

'Holiday with a bit of fun, like?' Phil asked. He had a feeling that his own fun was turning perverse as he spoke. But he

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enjoyed a kind of quick hiss that came from McLeod, as if the bleeder was reckoning they'd made a trick.

'Quite so – quite so.' Hannay, as he came near to the nub of the matter, contrived a nod as respectable as a bishop's. 'There's endless money *there*, you know. Like it or not, Tombs, we live in an expense-account world. And men in responsible positions have to – um – recruit themselves. But the fact is that England is deuced small for the purpose. You're always rubbing up against the other fellow. so to speak.'

'Not what you want to be rubbing up against at all, like,' Phil offered

'Exactly.' Hannay, who had looked startled for a moment, gave a kind of cackle that Phil appreciated as a new stage in the affair. 'The truth is that we have to go after the *hoi poloi*. A useful Greek phrase. But I speak comparatively, you understand. Faceless men, let us say. Do you realize that two hundred and twenty thousand prosperous provincial males come into London for a stay of less than twenty-four hours every day?'

'No,' Phil said, 'I don't.' He came out with this quite the wrong way, figures being something he had a respect for. But Hannay was unchecked.

'It's a sober fact, my dear fellow. And the time-factor is the whole thing. That right – um – Colin?'

'That is right. You understand time-factor, yes?' McLeod leaned forward on his bulging hips and laid a hand on Phil's arm that he could feel the clamminess of right through the honest tweed protecting it. 'Three hours – two hours – one hour for the good time. Then the Manchester train, the Leeds, the Birmingham train, and back to domesticals, yes?' McLeod gave a sudden leer like he'd taken his pants off. 'Back to ma and the kiddies, no?'

There was a kind of small voice in Phil's head, telling him that he'd had his joke and that this was where he walked out. But the voice, somehow, was a bit too small to get him moving.

'So what?' he said.

McLeod took a quick furtive look round the lounge. He licked his lips with a tongue that had a nasty point to it. Again he leaned forward.

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'Greater London Sextettes,' he said. 'You put your money there, no? We double it in twelve months.'

'Sextets?' Phil said. 'I can't say I'm all that musical, I can't. Not that I don't like a good chune, like.'

This imbecility shook them – but not, perhaps, as much as Phil was shaken himself. He was walking, he guessed, straight into the sort of temptation that his auntie, and Artie Coutts, and for that matter the Primitive Methodists in New Street would have promised him. Sextettes rearing their ugly heads. For he wasn't so dumb he didn't see that McLeod felt he'd thought up a good crack with that one. Corny, Phil would call it.

'Small sexy shows – see?' McLeod, in spite of a warning nod from the more cautious Hannay, had come clean, sure enough. 'A whole chain of them. High class Rue Pigalle stuff – and one within reach of any guy with a bit of time and money anywhere round town, yes? Girls, gags, giggles. But mostly girls.'

'Of a refined type,' Hannay said. 'Um – stimulating and all that sort of thing. But artistic. Continental artistes.'

McLeod nodded. There was a bead of sweat running down his nose, and his eye that was on Phil had gone like a snake's.

'You ever had Continental girls, no? I got six coming in from Hungary next week – if I can find the cash. Always I can feed girls through – with finance, Mr Tombs, with finance. So there's our offer. Controlling interest, you can have, Mr Tombs. Stay as much in the background as you like, and no risks attached. Only privileges, no?'

'Privileges?' Phil said. He found that he was trembling all over. It was that, perhaps, that prevented him a second time from getting up and walking out.

'We mustn't hurry Tombs in this important matter.' Hannay, as he said this, stood up. 'He will want – um – to inspect some of the enterprises on offer. And in actual operation. Come along.'

Phil found that the daze he was in had a real grip on him. Almost he wondered whether brandy did something to you

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just by evaporating near your nose. For he was going along. All three, they were making their way out of the lounge.

'In operation?' he said, rather feebly. 'At this time of day?'

McLeod took him by the arm.

'*Permanong*,' he said. 'You seen that in the Pigalle? All day and every day. We've got some way to go, but we're working towards that. *Les Sextettes Permanongs de Londres*. Good, no?'

'Bleeding good, man.' The devil had suddenly entered Phil again, and he spoke as if he'd drunk all the brandy that he hadn't. He wondered if they had something up their sleeves that would really fix him – a Mata Hari waiting on a tiger-skin, or perhaps some way of compromising him that would get him feeling he'd been put on the wrong side of the law. You read about such things, and here he was in the middle of them. '*Permanong*,' he said, and managed to sway slightly on McLeod's arm. '*Double entong*. Topical song.' He glimpsed McLeod and Hannay exchanging a swift glance. They were wondering whether they hadn't got him too badly jarred, and he saw it was with relief that they were through the swing-doors of their sodding Grand Excelsior and tumbling him into the waiting car.

'Number Four, Joe,' Hannay said to Hotchkiss – who wasn't holding a rug this time.

'Oky-doke,' Hotchkiss said familiarly. And they drove off.

He'd better have a drag, Phil thought, and felt in his pockets. And what his hand came on was that packet he'd bought on Friday in Melchizedek's. It was crumpled but there were still two or three fags in it, and when he fished one out it was like a hundred years ago. Twenty Camels, please. A hundred houris. Or just six Hungarians. He had a panic feeling that he didn't know about himself. Not a thing.

The car swung into a shabby street and then into a shabbier one. It was queer how in London you got posh places and plain sodding squalor on top of each other. He was accustomed to mean streets but these mean streets alarmed him. He remembered that he had nearly fifty pounds on him, and it came into

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his head that what they were perhaps really after was robbing him. Naturally he knew in a second that such an idea was nonsense. Hannay mightn't be the big shot he made out – in fact it was certain he wasn't – but at least he must operate in what you'd call a middling large way. Going about in a car like this as he was, anything Phil had in his pockets couldn't mean a thing to him. But then Phil had another notion that a bit scared him. These crooks might be kidnappers, mightn't they? He'd read how millionaires sometimes get their kids stolen – and as Phil hadn't any kids himself perhaps Hannay and this lot had decided to nab him. Perhaps they'd hold on to him, and even torture him, until he agreed to let them have his money. Phil had just managed to tell himself this was as silly an idea as he'd had yet, when the car stopped and he found himself tumbling out of it.

This time, Hotchkiss didn't make even a pretence of assisting. He was sitting back and lighting a cigarette. It seemed to be taken for granted that it was now reasonable to drop a lot of the eye-wash. Phil would certainly hear nothing more about Hannay's chumminess with Prendick. The crooks were reckoning they had him on a hook now – the strong hook of sexual curiosity – and that soon they'd be landing him pretty. Which was nonsense, Phil told himself. But he followed Hannay and McLeod.

He had no notion of his whereabouts, and a quick look up and down certainly revealed no landmarks. There were just small shops, and a couple of street barrows, and a dog nosing at some garbage. But there was a rumble of traffic from quite close by, so it was reasonable to suppose they were just at the back of some considerable thoroughfare.

Phil had noticed no more than this when he was inside what turned out to be a miserable little newsagent's and tobacconist's. There was a counter with dailies and weeklies and comics and paper-backs – Westerns, they seemed to be, rather than sexy ones – and there was one of those revolving stands with picture post-cards of scraggy men and fat women working hard at corny jokes at the seaside, and behind the counter there was the sort of scraggy man that exists only on post-cards

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except when you find him selling them. They didn't stop to have any dealings with this chap, but went straight through the shop to an inner room.

It was a shabby little place smelling of cats, and it throbbed faintly and disconcertingly to some sort of muffled music that didn't sound like radio.

'Our office,' McLeod said with a kind of soft briskness that showed he was taking charge. 'Make yourself at home, yes?'

Phil didn't much feel that he wanted to do that. In fact what he felt rather strongly was that he didn't want to touch anything. And for that matter Hannay didn't seem to like the place either. You could see that it put him a bit out of countenance. Perhaps he was reflecting that it represented a sad decline from the fifteen-storey affair he'd run up in the City only a few weeks ago.

'Our office in this part of the town, that is,' he said a bit foolishly, and appeared to be looking round for some surface not too dusty to put down his gloves on. He chose the top of a large steel filing cabinet which, along with a big map on a bare wall, was the only unexpected thing in the room. 'And it has the advantage,' he added, 'of adjoining one of our most vigorous - I may say healthiest - enterprises. As you will presently see.'

So that, Phil thought, was the explanation of the music. There was a sextette more or less on the premises.

'All right,' he said. 'I come to see it, and I'll see it. But let's get along.'

McLeod nodded - but at the same time raised one of his pudgy hands in a restraining gesture.

'But first,' he said, 'look at the map, please. It explains what we do. It explains what we *could* do - with fresh capital, Mr Tombs, no?' He might have been speaking about any sort of business thing. Only, every now and then, his eyes came on Phil in quick veiled calculation, and his little pointed tongue came out and licked his lips.

Phil looked at the map. It was of London, and marked on it were six red crosses and six green ones. There were red dotted lines running, some more and some less directly, from red

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cross to red cross. In each red cross there were stuck one or two colour-headed pins, and there were similar pins here and there on the dotted lines. In red ink, too, there were what appeared to be a lot of small intricate calculations. The green crosses were isolated, and without pins or figures.

'The red crosses, Mr Tombs – these are the entertainments we have established. The clubs, you understand? What in my joke I call –'

'Yes,' Phil said. 'I got that one.'

'The green crosses – they are clubs to come. It is like chain stores, Mr Tombs, but more organizational. Much, much more organizational. There are perplexities, yes! Look at the red lines.'

Phil looked at the red lines. Most of them ran along streets. Some followed what must be the course of the Underground.

'Communications, like?' he asked.

'Precisely the word, my dear Tombs.' Hannay had chipped in, brightening a little. 'I have no doubt that, like myself, you are an old Army man. The absorbingly interesting and intricate problems of logistics are familiar to you. It is just such problems that we have to deal with in our – um – present walk of life.'

'Now look at the pins,' McLeod said. He paid no attention to Hannay.

Phil looked at the pins. He was aware that the faintly throbbing music – or the whole outfit of associations and suppressed expectations with which it was tied up – was doing something to his head. He couldn't find the pins at all interesting.

'Audience?' he asked. 'Members – whatever you call them?'

McLeod shook his head – and once more gave Phil that furtive look.

'*Les girls*,' he said.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

FOR a moment the phrase conveyed nothing to Phil. Then he understood.

'Well,' he said, 'I suppose they're important – seeing you live on them.' As soon as he'd made this crack he found himself feeling rather apologetic about it. He was what you'd have to call associating with this nasty Wog, after all. There was no explanation of his being in this place now, staring at this queer map and cocking his ear at that disturbing music, that wasn't a bit dirty as explanations go. 'All right,' he said. 'The pins are show-girls, and they're doing logistics. Kind of belly dance, perhaps. Go on.'

For a moment McLeod's eyes narrowed on him. It was rather as if he was seeing Phil when doing tough stuff as something less promising than it looked. Then he was all the businessman again. The businessman, Phil thought – and not, like Hannay, the fake business gent. Phil was coming to have rather a liking for this bit of dirt that gave himself the decent name of McLeod. It was the kind of liking you take to a man when you're warming up to clock him.

'The club premises – they are nothing,' McLeod was saying. 'The law and the registering – that is nothing, either. And the clientele – ah, that is the least smallest headache of all, no? Never, never – never in Berlin, Hamburg, Paris, Cairo – was there such a clientele as you have for the askings in London today. But always it is the girls, Mr Tombs, that are the big, big worry. Finding the girls, getting in the girls, training the girls – all that is hard. But hardest of all' – and McLeod tapped the map with a kind of soft angry passion – 'is moving the girls around. The traffic, Mr Tombs! The state of affairs that the police are permitting in the London streets – it is a disgrace and a scandal, yes? Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes a girl will be in a traffic-block. And the show waiting! It is not bearable!'

'Perfectly intolerable!' Hannay was clinging on still to some-

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thing of the Brigadier. 'One ought to complain to the Commissioner. One ought to have a question asked in the House. Consider, my dear Tombs, the crippling taxes we are obliged to pay – while all the time we are having our profits ticking away in taxi-cabs, or seeping out of our – um – establishments with complaints that things are going too slow. It is extremely aggravating. And I express myself mildly.'

'The girls go round from show to show?' Phil asked. This somehow hadn't occurred to him.

'Quick, quick, quick!' McLeod said. In his pulpy way he was getting quite worked up. 'It is the whole secret, yes? Please think, Mr Tombs. Once a girl has done her turn – our sort of turn – there is no more interest in her. It is a psychological thing, no? There has been this excitement. It has built up and it has built up. For five minutes, for ten minutes perhaps it can hold. Then she must finish – drop what you call the last stitch, yes? – and at once it breaks, it is over. *Da capo* – no good. *Encore* – no good. As spectacle, she has been had, no? There is nothing more she can do – except pick up her things and move on.'

'To the next show?' Phil asked.

'To the next show. And to *this* show another girl has arrived.'

'If the police,' Hannay interposed, 'haven't been grossly incompetent and allowed another traffic block, that is to say. The fact is that, with conditions just as they are at present, we have to cut it deuced fine.'

'And the answer is more girls, better and quicker training, and – above all – our own fleet of fast cars.' McLeod offered this with the firm assurance of the know-how chap that tells his fellow directors they must put their shirts on somebody's new system of office filing. 'A well-handled car would cut an average of five minutes off every trip.'

'Time and motion study, like?' Phil said. For a moment he had a disturbed vision of a line of McLeod's girls, dressed in their skins, being trundled past what McLeod called his clientele on a conveyor belt. 'Keep moving seems to be your motto. But what about dancing and the like?' Memories of dubious

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reading were coming into his head. 'Don't your customers get a turn with them that way?'

'No, no – nothing of that kind.' It was Hannay who spoke this time. 'Our resources in – um – woman-power simply won't run to anything of the sort.'

McLeod nodded.

'In Marseilles, yes. Even in Nice, yes. But London, no.'

'What about that Paris lot?' Phil asked. 'Pig Street.'

'Ah, the Pigalle! But to that we have a long way to go. You have heard that the English take their pleasures sadly, no? They come in, they sit, they drink, they watch, they go away again! It is *morne*, Mr Tombs – but it is the money-spinner, yes?' And McLeod laughed softly.

'Mark you,' Hannay said, 'there has to be a bouncer on the spot. Occasionally, the clientele does try to get at the girls. But it is unusual. The morals of our whole enterprise – you will be delighted to know – are remarkably pure. The artistic spectacle is all. And a quick turnover, my dear Tombs – at least in one sense of the term. Although it would be open to you, I need hardly say, to explore other aspects of the enterprise yourself. There is much to be said for a certain element of personal relationship between – um – capital and labour. You will find we take a very liberal view in matters of that sort.'

'And now look,' McLeod said.

It was rather, Phil supposed, like being a projectionist in a cinema. He'd thought he'd be taken down into this show-place, or whatever it should be called. But instead he was taken along a corridor and into a dark room no bigger than a cupboard. And McLeod had slid back a panel in the wall and motioned him to step up to it. And there was this place like a brightly lit picture, floating a bit below him.

Pitiful, it was – peeping like this, like a kid that's found a key-hole and thinks he's going to learn something. But with McLeod it was no doubt just plain business sense again, since he'd do well to have a way of keeping an eye on things without making himself too prominent. The music was louder now, but Phil couldn't see where it came from. The place was like

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a café or a small restaurant. And it wasn't all that brightly lit, as he'd first thought when peering out of this nasty darkness. There was a circle of tables with coloured cloths and low lights on them. Outside that there was another circle, or half-circle, that seemed to be more tables set back in kind of alcoves, so that the people at them could do most of their seeing without being much seen. He was reminded of a prison, and he wondered why. Then he remembered a picture he'd seen of a prison chapel, with all the lags in little boxes, hollaring hymns, and with none of them seeing anybody but a chaplain getting ready to pray and that, up in a pulpit. Like that, it was.

There was a bare table in the middle, not much bigger than the others, with a kind of raised cat-walk running away from it to some curtains at the back. He couldn't tell how many people there were in the place, but it certainly wasn't anything near full. They weren't talking much – rather as if they had that feeling of a chapel too – but it was clear that there was drink, since you could smell it almost as much as you could smell the tobacco smoke and the general frowst of the place. Then suddenly the music gave a blare and a spotlight flicked on at the far end of the cat-walk and the curtains had parted and a girl had come through.

Phil felt something tighten in his chest. There was nothing cheap about her, he saw in an instant – or not as what she was being sold as. She was tall and dark, and she wasn't all that young. Her face was a haughty mask, and you could see how rich and full her body was, because she was dressed in a sheath of gold that went to her hips and then flared out in a great golden skirt. She walked straight up the cat-walk with the spotlight tracking her, and she stood quite still on the centre table, as erect as a great tree. The music had stopped, and for seconds there was a dead silence while she held this effect, dominating McLeod's sodding clientele like she was a goddess. Then softly the music stirred, and she stirred too.

He'd heard of dancing like that, but he'd never seen it – not even anything quite like it in a film. You couldn't see her legs or feet – not yet, you couldn't – but you could tell it was only her heels and never her toes she ever lifted from the table. It

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was with all the muscles of her body she was dancing. Her whole body rippled in subtle surfaces of gleaming gold. She managed to be utterly alone in this cramped little Peeping-Tommery place. She might have been the first woman – Lilith, was it – in the first throes of procreation the world had ever seen.

The music, which seemed to be all pulse and beat and nothing more, quickened a shade – and suddenly you saw that the golden sheath had parted at the neck and arms, and that her shoulders were free. It was as if some great golden rind had begun to split and to reveal a soft incredible fruit inside. The sheath came softly down. The woman's face remained a mask. Her body worked, and Phil felt his own breathing to be involved with it. That's all right, he told himself tough. See Naples and die. No surprises in this mug's game. She won't turn out to be a mermaid when the band stops. You've had it, and you needn't come again. What your auntie calls the strippers. What chaps hurry up to London to see when they've had a windfall of fifty pounds. ... Only for fifty thousand, perhaps, *you* can buy the lot.

He watched it to the end – which was through an eternity, and yet no time at all. And how right McLeod was. With the last stitch the spell did mysteriously snap. Where a second before there had been this high-powered erotic experience there was only a near-naked woman, exploited and tired and indifferent, picking up a bundle of soiled tinsel from her feet and walking off behind a curtain. There was some uncertain applause, like you might get at a concert the audience didn't know was religious or not. And you felt as flat and silly as after any sodding unnatural thing.

Phil heard McLeod's voice in the near-darkness beside him – like it might be Mephistopheles whispering to Faust.

'It is foolish – no? – the pleasures of the *voyeur*. To come in, to buy champagne, to stare – it is only for the fools we take a fool's money from. Illusion! Common day-dream, Mr Tombs, given for five, ten minutes a little more vividness – yes? – by art. But that girl! She is real. She is putting on her street-clothes now – and that same body will be beneath them. We have

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twenty girls, thirty girls, like that. In six months we could have sixty. It is interesting, no?’

And Phil suddenly felt strange. He felt tired and beaten – as he’d already felt tired and beaten on some other and infinitely distant occasion that day.

‘What d’you take me for?’ he said with a desperate roughness. ‘The bleeding Bey of Algiers?’

And he followed McLeod back to the scraggy little news-agent’s nasty inner room.

### *Chapter Fifteen*

THERE was another chap there with Hannay now – a hulking great tough in a stained monkey-suit like a low-class waiter’s. He seemed to have come up from the show, and Phil supposed that, among other things, he was the bouncer. He was talking angrily at Hannay, who didn’t seem to know at all what to do with him.

‘Happening all the bleeding time,’ the tough was saying. ‘Ten minutes, fifteen minutes – who wouldn’t mizzle? Worry, I’ve had it till it’s chronic.’

‘You’ve got films, haven’t you?’ Hannay asked. ‘Show them a film, man, instead of coming up here and wasting time complaining.’

‘Films? Trouble with you, Mr Sodding Hannay, is that you don’t know your bloody onions. The films is waste of money, like I always said they were. Englishmen don’t *like* films – see?’ The tough, to Hannay’s obvious alarm and Phil’s satisfaction, was turning aggressive. ‘They think a dirty film’s *dirty* – and I don’t blame them. A girl’s natural, I say – and a girl in the altogether’s more natural still. But them things that happen on foreign films just ain’t decent, see?’ The tough was for a moment massively reasonable. ‘Take the mickey out of you and nothing to show for it. It ain’t British, and be buggered to you.’

Phil rather expected McLeod to chip in. He was certain now that McLeod was the real boss. But McLeod was only looking at his watch, and then at the map with its red lines and coloured

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pins. What you might call a master-mind, McLeod was. Phil felt he liked him still better. He was soft, of course. But, if you gave him fair warning, it would be honest enough to get him on the jaw. It would be tempting to get him right where he was exploiting people. But the jaw would do.

'This is outrageous!' Hannay, although unconvincingly, was all rolled umbrella and bowler hat. 'You know what this means, my man? It means a week's notice.'

'And do *you* know what *this* means?' Pleasingly, the tough had pushed back the sleeve of his spotty dinner-jacket to reveal a dirty and hairy arm. He flexed this so that the muscles bulged like Sandow's in the book Phil had done exercises out of as a kid. He clenched his fist and advanced it under Hannay's nose. 'It means 'orspital, it does.'

'And it means jug too, if you don't behave yourself, yes?' McLeod had now stepped forward – but not too far forward – and was looking at the tough with cold venom. 'The next turn will be here any time. Get back to your job, see? And hot up that rotten band.'

At this moment the door of the little room opened. Phil turned round. A young girl, just a kid, had tumbled scared and panting over its threshold.

It was from this point, Phil was to see afterwards, that it all changed for him. Now he stared at the kid, and it just seemed that she couldn't belong to all this. She was pinched and thin, as if she hadn't been nourished proper, and there wasn't a curve on her that the dirtiest of McLeod's suckers could think of putting a hand to. She was dressed poor, too, like she'd be ashamed even to walk down Gas Street. And she stood there breathing quick and terrified, and looking from one to another of these men. She looked for a second at Phil as well, and there was a flicker on her scared face, as if she didn't rightly understand him. Then she broke into frightened speech.

'I couldn't help it – honest I couldn't.' She spoke to the tough. 'There was a rotten guy wouldn't let me go. And then there was a hold-up. I ran from the corner. And then I had to walk because there was a copper looking. Honest.'

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'Couldn't help it, couldn't you? There'll be a lot you won't be able to help, if it happens again.' The tough made a move at the girl which he checked at some quick sign from McLeod. 'Get along with you then. The bleeding floor's waiting.'

The girl gave another quick look at Phil – it might have been in a kind of bewildered unconscious appeal – and then ran from the room and down the narrow corridor past the place where Phil had done his peeping. There must be a way through to the sodding club that way.

'Here! That kid isn't going to dance, is she?' Phil almost looked round for who was speaking. He'd hardly recognized his own voice, there had come so queer a crack in it.

There was a second's silence. Hannay was looking uncomfortable, as if his lines were giving out on him and it was time he'd crawled into the wings. McLeod's tongue was flickering at his lips, and he was looking at Phil with a calculation that had gone quite icy. So it was the tough that spoke.

'Dance? She'll dance all right, if I take something to her. The lazy little bleeder! I'll take –'

'Get out!' McLeod had turned on the tough with a soft savage fury that sent him shambling out of the room like he'd been whipped.

'What does that kid do?' Phil was facing McLeod squarely. It was the first time he'd managed it.

'Go and look.' McLeod spoke at his softest, and pointed towards the corridor.

'What does she do, I ask you?'

'Not dance, certainly, Mr Tombs.' McLeod gave a kind of still smile, as if he were confident he'd get Phil yet. 'What she does do, she is beginning to do now. She doesn't need to change.' Again he made his gesture towards the corridor. 'It is interesting. There is imagination in it. *My* imagination, Mr Tombs, which is going to change London, yes?' He paused for a moment. 'So go,' he said softly.

'I'll see you in hell first, I will.'

McLeod shrugged his shoulders and glanced swiftly at Hannay. Phil thought it was the first flicker of doubt the bastard



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had felt that he could buy any money with what he'd got. But he was going to try again.

'Then shall I tell you?' he asked softly. 'Yes? It would be inartistic, a dance by that little one after the other, no? So it is a small mime.'

'Go on,' Phil said. He didn't know the word McLeod had used, but he wasn't going to let on to that.

'They will sweep London – and then the other great towns – these small mimes of mine.' McLeod's eyes glittered now, and for the first time Phil wondered whether he might be a bit crazy, the way so many crooks were. 'And to discover a child like that, it is *faire une trouvaille*, no?'

Phil, of course, didn't understand this either. But he knew it was rubbish, so he didn't mind about that.

'Go on,' he said again.

'You saw the curtain? There is a little stage – very small, but sufficient. The curtain will go up, and there will be a bedroom. But not what you call a love-nest, Mr Tombs.'

'I don't use them words. Go on.'

'A very poor, a very shabby little bedroom. The kind of room in which any of those fools' – and McLeod made a gesture seeming to indicate the members of his club – 'might think to keep a servant – as you say a slavey, no?'

'I don't use that either. Go on.'

McLeod shifted his little feet on the dirty threadbare carpet beneath them. He was uneasy now. But, at the same time, his own genius was possessing him.

'The curtain rises and the girl comes in. Panting and frightened, just as you have seen her. So if she is really that, it is all the better! She has a little shabby suitcase. She shuts the door, leans against it, tries to lock it. There is no key. Quickly she puts a chair under the handle. She listens. She is very frightened still. But she is also very, very tired. She hesitates. She kicks off her shoes. She –'

'Tell me how it ends,' Phil said. He didn't see that he need take more than what would get it clear.

McLeod told. It took only a couple of minutes. And then there was a second in which Phil found nothing to say. He

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only knew that blood was beating up in him. He looked round and saw that Hannay had vanished. So had Hannay's bowler and umbrella and gloves. It just showed that, beneath all that fool patter, he had a spot of common sense.

'How long you had this kid going round doing this?' Phil asked. He managed it quite like he was making conversation.

'But only ten days!' If McLeod hadn't been the colour of an old pint pot, he'd probably have been flushed with triumph. 'It is miracle, no? And so very, very young.'

'Yes – that too,' Phil said. 'Just how old, do you know?'

McLeod took a quick glance round the little room, although he must have known that he and Phil were alone in it.

'Sixteen,' he said. 'She has – what? – say two, three, five years before she is finished. And what will she have earned by then, Mr Tombs – perhaps for you?'

If Phil stood still for seconds after this, it was because he was having a spot of trouble with himself on what you might call the moral plane. He didn't really have the right to do what he was going to do – not after almost playing ball with this crowd all through an afternoon. But perhaps he could kind of buy the right back. Perhaps he would be doing that if, in doing his stuff now, he stuck out his neck as far as it would go. His hands had been in his trouser-pockets. He took them out.

'You, McLeod,' he said. 'What's your real name?'

McLeod's face changed instantly. It was as if he knew something unexpected was coming up. He took a step towards the door, but Phil got in front of him.

'I call you –' Phil paused, almost affable, and the right word came to him. 'I been calling you that,' he continued, 'quite some time. Pardon me if I'm wrong. And I don't like your face.' He paused. 'In fact,' he said luxuriously, 'I'm going to hit it, see?'

McLeod did see. Very sensibly, he decided to get in first – and with his knee. But Phil was ready for that one. He side-stepped, and cracked his left on what McLeod had as an apology for a chin. As he expected, McLeod went down in a gutless way on the floor. Phil turned and walked from the room.

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He was hoping to find Hannay in the corridor But Hannay was still lying low

Phil ran down the corridor He had quite something to do before these chaps got organized He went past the peeping place – and he remembered, as he did so, that there were people who preferred peeping to anything else This whole racket was for their sort, and he didn't see any need to disapprove of them They'd been made that way, poor sods But what you fed them – and to make money out of – was a different matter He was going to find that kid The first thing was to find that kid and get her out of the place That was serious The second thing was to raise hell That mightn't end comfortable But it would be good while it went on

As he'd supposed there was a staircase that linked the corridor to the club He went down it, and through a door, and the place was in front of him McLeod's sextette A hot-spot, he'd heard such a joint being called Innocent dirt, it had sounded like any of the common leg-shows he'd seen in his time But then you'd never thought of a kid like that Sixteen Christ he'd hot them

It was going on as McLeod had said There was the kid on the little stage and here was the clientele, sitting at its table and drinking its champagne made out of Yorkshire rhubarb and having its sexy fling and sometimes looking at its watches and wondering about the train back to Preston Yes, there the kid was not knowing whether she was in horrible fear or just taking it – and the sodding mime hadn't got very far, because she still had her clothes on The question was how to get things moving quick

Phil stood for a moment taking it in making what his platoon commander had liked to call an appreciation The point was all these folk were feeling scared and guilty Perhaps the Frogs in Pig Street managed this kind of thing lighthearted – but if you came from Preston there were all your chapel-going ancestors telling you it was sin And there were the papers, too, telling you that in clubs like this there were gangsters itching to plug each other and perhaps take a shot at you incidental as well And finally there was the police, who had

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come raiding joints like this before the Hannays and the McLeods had thought up legal dodges that baffled them – but then in Preston you were a bit behind the times and weren't sure there mightn't any moment be a copper taking down your name and address to go in your local paper. Vulnerable, these suckers were.

He was standing by a table had two of them at it, and there was a bottle on it covered with golden paper they'd paid a couple of quid for. He looked round for something to chuck the bottle at, and he saw a great limelight affair was playing on the kid, so he picked up the bottle and chucked it at that. There was a smash of glass, and the light went out, and Phil shouted anything that came in his head. Then he made for the little stage. The chap he didn't want to meet yet was the tough in the monkey-suit. That would come later.

It was a pitiful little joint. When you were down in it you saw you could hardly swing a cat in the whole place. So he was on the stage in what seemed just one jump and he'd taken the kid by the wrist and he'd kicked away that chair she'd seemed to jam against the door and he was through the door with her and that was a start.

If the dicks couldn't do much about vice, he thought, they could still be a bit sticky about fire, so somewhere behind these rotten bits of scenery there must be an exit that took you straight into open air. And he was right, for in seconds they were through a door and in a narrow passage that was so stacked with empty tins and bottles you could hardly get through it. Beyond that was a side-street and a van rattling cheerfully past. Phil banged the door shut and turned to the girl.

'Here,' he said, 'you liking what you're doing?'

She was blubbing and he saw that she was just a dateless silly kid as he'd supposed. Now she began to stammer. Phil could hear uproar in the place behind them, and he reckoned he had a minute or so, but no more than that, to get rid of her.

'I wanted to b-b-be an actress,' she sobbed.

'I didn't ask you that. I asked you if you liked this.' This time he got no reply from her. But she seemed to be shaking her

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head He put a hand on her shoulder. 'You got a name?' he asked.

'B-B-B -' She gulped down a kid's scared sob. 'Beryl'

The coincidence shook him, although not meaning a thing, and he tightened his grip on her.

'Got a home, haven't you?' he asked.

This time she nodded She was trembling all through her thin body.

'Then get back to it,' he said. 'Now. Promise me.'

She looked up at him, startled

'But I c-c-can't,' she said M-My d-d-dad - he'd strap me.'

It shook him, that, too There was almost nothing that you could hit

'Your dad often do that?' he asked

'N n no But he'd s-s-strap me for this, he would.'

'Then you be off home and get strapped' Something you'd call wholesome working-class realism was in charge of Phil now It almost brought him to add, as he drew the silly little creature down the passage, 'And tell your dad to add a good one from me Instead, he said 'All right, Beryl You're not a bad kid But it's dirty, that see? And it's against the law, with a girl your age Get Borstal, you might if they caught you.' He waited until she'd gulped down another terrified sob. 'Know your way? Got money?'

'Y-y-yes'

They were right in the open air now, and he gave her first a bit of a hug, and then a push like you might give a toy boat to start it on a pond

'Better run till you get to the main road,' he said prosaically. 'And so long, Beryl'

To his immense relief, she ran away as straight as a bird you've tossed into the air But she wasn't five yards from him before he heard the door behind him flung open, and he whirled round with his fists up He didn't believe they'd dare go after the kid now - or even take her back if she went asking for it Still, he wasn't taking chances, and he was quite ready for a bit of rear-guard stuff

But it was Hannay. It was the bleeding Colonel, with gloves

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and bowler and umbrella complete. The only thing he'd shed in the course of the day was that neatly folded newspaper. That, and perhaps a dash of the military manner. Certainly he wasn't looking warlike now. He hadn't come out after Phil's blood. He'd come out pretty well on tiptoe and with nothing in his head but doing a quiet scam. When he saw Phil with his fists up he turned and scurried like a rabbit.

The sensible thing, it was clear to Phil, would be to walk off the way the kid had run. There was nothing to stop him, and he'd be clear of this crowd with something like honours even. Only he had promised himself something else. If he hadn't drunk their brandy, at least he'd given a sniff at it. So he wanted to tell them something. As Phil thought this, he found his legs had got ahead of his thinking. His legs were taking him after Hannay, who was haring it – or rabbiting it – back into the club. Phil, as he ran, gave a kick at a pile of tins and bottles – and the clatter sent Hannay forward with an extra bound like he'd had a boot in the bottom. There wasn't anything too gory now for Phil's imagination. He'd belt the hell out of them.

Thus obscurely compelled to expiation, Phil ran on.

### *Chapter Sixteen*

THE place looked pretty well wrecked, so that at first Phil thought the clientele must have rioted. But they'd had no call to do that, and when you'd looked around, you saw they'd merely panicked and bolted, knocking over a lot of tables and glasses as they went. Not that Phil had much time to observe this, for now a bottle went past his head and smashed on the wall behind him. Somebody who didn't like him much had been pretty quick to see he'd come back again.

For some reason this manner of assault angered him greatly.

'Bottles!' he shouted. 'I'll learn you to fight with bottles, you bleeders!' It wasn't a dignified way to talk – but neither, fortunately, had it to be an empty threat. For there was a whole crate of bottles, as it happened, straight under his hand as he

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stood. He hauled one out and chucked it, more or less at random, where he thought the other had come from. It smashed harmlessly – not to the accompaniment of the howl of agony he was hoping for – so he yanked out a second and chucked that. This one was a spectacular success as far as uproar went. It landed where the rotten place must have kept its band, and scored a hit on the cymbals, the triangle, and the tubular bells before coming down with a crash on the drum. That was just the job, Phil thought. He was going to make a racket would bring in not only the police but the Salvation Army and the fire brigade and the guard from Buckingham Palace as well.

But now another bottle went past his head so close he felt the wind of it. So many of the little lamps on the table had gone over that the whole place was nearly in darkness, and he could just see three or four figures moving warily near what must be the main entrance opposite him. Perhaps they weren't very confident about holding their ground at all. They might well think he wouldn't have ventured back like this without the law with him. Not that perhaps he wasn't breaking the law more than they were. Well, that was all right by him. He flung another bottle – low, this time. There was a yelp of pain in the near darkness that went to his head like wine. He started shouting things, including the rude name he'd called McLeod. And then they rushed him.

If you'd been there with a stop-watch you'd have had to admit, perhaps, that he didn't last very long. But then a ruck or a rough-house wasn't particularly his line. He wasn't scared of such things, only they weren't, you might say, him. Not ordinarily. But this wasn't ordinary, and he enjoyed it right up to the time it began to hurt far more than was bearable. He didn't much care about McLeod now. He'd had a kind of settlement with him. And Hannay – for some reason that seemed wholly unfair – it would be no fun to hit at all. But he did want a swipe at the tough in the monkey-suit. And he got it in – a hard crack on the jaw that left his whole arm tingling – before someone kicked his legs from under him and he was down on the floor with a table on top of him. He struggled to his feet, for a second saw the bogus chauffeur Hotchkiss's face

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in front of him, and before he could take a swipe at that he was struck in the stomach so expertly that he was down again and this time helpless. Then again he was yanked upright, but only so that McLeod could knee him twice where it was agony. Then somebody was knocking his head from side to side, and he could hear Hannay calling out like a scared kid for God's sake stop or they'd be topped for it. Then he was on the floor again and they were kicking him till he passed out.

But the unconsciousness was only partial, or something that came and went. It didn't help much with the pain. And once he heard Hannay protesting again, and McLeod saying to hell but that's what he was going to do, and Hannay, like a ghost of the Brigadier, saying it was madness and outrageous, and McLeod screaming with laughter and saying they fixed it in Chicago that way. Then Phil lapsed again – and then he had a flickering notion that Hotchkiss was carrying him somewhere. His mind even struggled with the impression that Hotchkiss was carrying him rather tenderly because he had professional fighting behind him that had left him with a bit of contempt for this business of beating a guy up. And then Phil fell on something soft that he dimly thought might be a bed. But just after that there came a jerk, and he knew that he'd been shoved into a car that had been got moving. They were taking him somewhere well clear of their sodding club – which was only sense. Perhaps they were going to chuck him in the river. He tried to remember if there was a river in Chicago. But, not being educated, he'd never known. And he went dead unconscious this time. Later, he had a weird impression of opening his eyes for a moment and seeing his own distorted face swimming in a black shining darkness that slid aside and vanished. After that again, he might have been asleep. And when he stopped being asleep, it was to see that Jean was bending over him.

The shock of recognizing her sent every battered bit of him pulsing, so that he thought he'd have to howl at its all hurting so. But perhaps there was no howl left in him, or perhaps he



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just managed to shut down on the impulse to do it. Anyway, he found that he was setting his teeth very hard together, and that he could take it. He even thought he could risk unclenching them, if just for a second.

'Hullo,' he said feebly. And then he made a sudden and violent effort to sit up, because it had come into his mind that these crooks might be about still, and that she might be in danger. It wasn't an effort that got him very far, but it did bring within his view a great silver bowl crammed with roses. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Didn't mean to come bothering you.' He felt himself frown, and something immediately began trickling into an eye. 'How'd I get here?' he asked.

'The lift. Dolly and I found you in the lift.' He became aware, as she spoke, that she was kneeling, and that she was in a new dress like for a ball, and that she wasn't taking her eyes off him.

'I get,' he said. His mind was beginning to work again. 'Delivered me back where they collected me, they did. Goods not wanted, like.'

'But who did?' She had put out a hand and very gently touched his face. Then she turned her head to someone he couldn't see. 'Dolly,' she said, 'don't just stare. Warm water. And both the towels.'

'Who did?' He moved his own head to see if it hurt. And it did. 'McLeod. The monkey-suit tough. Hotchkiss. Them that beat me up.'

'Beat you up? It hasn't just been a street accident?' Jean started back, horrified.

'Street accident!' He heard himself speak feebly but with large contempt. Then he managed something like a grin. 'I clocked them a bit. Then they clobbered me proper. Belted the wind out of me. Got me good in -' He checked himself. 'Not your kind of thing,' he said. 'And not your girlfriend's.'

'Girlfriend?' She was puzzled.

'Her I haven't seen yet. Dolly.'

'Oh!' There was a second's something he was still not up to catching. And then she laughed. 'Dolly isn't a girl. He's a man.'

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'My mistake.' It sounded silly to him – but then so would a lot of other things in her world do, he supposed. 'If I could get my head up a bit,' he said.

'Let me help.'

She put a hand under his head, so that her fingers were in his hair. And then things happened that his mind seemed to open to and grasp as if by a lightning flash. His scalp was messy like other parts of him, so when she brought her hand away there was blood on it. She looked at the blood, and then at him, straight from this ruck. And it was as if the thing that hadn't happened over that rice stuff and Chianti was there in an instant between them. Her breast was heaving, and she looked at him like he couldn't describe – it was as if he wasn't a person hardly, and no more was she.

'Phil,' she whispered. 'Phil.' And she stooped swiftly and crushed her mouth on his bruised lips.

She'd hardly drawn back when he was aware of Dolly. At least he was aware of a pair of dress shoes and black trousers – and then vaguely of a dinner-jacketed figure holding a bowl of water he'd brought from some wash-place. Phil wondered what the time was. He hadn't known offices were used this way – by Younger Set types all got up for gracious living.

'Is the poor beggar bad?' Dolly asked this in a voice that somehow reminded Phil of that morning in the train. But it certainly wasn't Mark Thickthorne's voice. What it was, in fact, was the Oxford Varsity voice that Phil himself had been fooling around with. Only this was a real one. 'Better call an ambulance or something,' Dolly said. 'And have him taken away.'

'Nonsense,' Jean said. 'I know him.' She was now sponging Phil's face, and she had spoken with complete self-possession. 'I had lunch with him, as a matter of fact. Am I hurting, Mr Tombs?'

Phil managed to say that he wasn't being hurt.

'Had lunch with him!' Phil hadn't yet been able to see this Dolly's face, but he could imagine that it was registering astonishment. 'Why, he's –' It seemed to Phil that what Dolly

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was going to say was something like 'He's a young Ted, isn't he?' But, instead, Dolly said, rather lamely, 'He's a new face to me.'

'What we must have is a doctor. What we mustn't have, on any account, is fuss or publicity.' Jean was as cool as cool, so that Phil could hardly believe she was the same girl who, only a minute before, had done that naked passionate thing. 'I don't think Mr Tombs has broken anything, but we can't take risks. I'll telephone.' She stood up, and Phil was able to take a glance at her that acknowledged absolute divinity. He felt as weak as a baby, but he didn't believe it was any longer from the beating he'd taken. It was because, miraculously, he'd passed some unbelievable gate.

'All right, Jean. But hurry up.' Phil could just see Dolly's wrist move, and he guessed he was looking at his watch. 'Of course we've got to do the right thing, and all that. But we don't want the evening mucked up.' He lowered his voice. 'Not this evening, of all evenings.'

Phil's heart gave a jerk behind bruised ribs. And then he heard Jean cut in with a new sharpness.

'Almost everybody's out of these offices. That's all to the good. But the switchboard's off. I'll have to go down to call the doctor.'

'I'll do that,' Dolly said. He said it, Phil thought, what you might call correctly but not eagerly.

'No - I know just what I want to explain. Stay with Mr Tombs. If he wants to move, help him - very cautiously. But don't try shifting him off your own bat. That's dangerous, till he's been examined.'

She'd gone. There was silence. The young man called Dolly stood motionless for a minute. He didn't seem to have a fancy for rolling back his sleeves and continuing with the job of mopping Phil up. But he did seem to feel that Phil was due something.

'I say,' he said, 'could you manage a cigarette?'

'Thanks a lot.'

As Phil said this it came to him that this lying there like a sack was getting a bit silly. He didn't feel too good still. But

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he did somewhere possess, after all, a bleeding will. So he sat up. It might have been worse.

He sat up, and so for the first time got a clear view of Dolly. And he realized why Dolly's voice had rung that bell. He recognized, in fact, whose Oxford Varsity voice he'd been imitating on the train. Sir Aubrey Moore's, of course. Dolly was him.

### *Chapter Seventeen*

PHIL felt he wanted to reach to a pocket and fetch out the last of those Camels for this Moore – just in memory of Melchizedek's. Or he felt like saying, 'How's your tobacco coming along?' Only, as he thought of it, it sounded dead common – rather like 'How's your mum off for dripping?' that the kids had a silly notion it was rude to shout at you in the street. And, anyway, here was Moore producing his own fags very civil, and giving Phil a light. Turkish, the fag was. And heaven.

'I'm frightfully sorry the brutes got you so badly.' The young man seemed honestly concerned. 'Jean's uncle will raise hell. I mean, that you were landed on his office doorstep like this.' Moore paused. Phil saw that he was being surveyed by one consulting all the social experience he had. 'I say,' Moore asked, 'do you belong to a gang, or something?'

Phil found this so funny that he laughed. It was about the rashest thing he'd done yet, for the result was as if somebody was passing a knife through his ribs.

'No,' he said. 'I'm a lawful citizen.' He paused, anxious to give an honest account of himself. 'And enormously rich,' he added.

'Oh – I see.' Sir Aubrey Moore looked at him a bit anxiously, clearly supposing that he'd turned delirious. 'Better keep quiet,' he added 'Jean will have that doctor here in no time.'

'Don't worry. I'll keep quiet, all right.' Phil managed another puff at his cigarette. 'Leastwise, I won't exactly get up and start another vulgar brawl.' He grinned at Moore, although it was a painful thing to do. 'But what I say is true,' he continued

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deliberately. 'Except that you may have a different notion of what's enormous.' He paused, because talking was no easier than grinning. But he was determined to get things clear between Moore and himself. 'I come from Oxford same as you do,' he said. 'Only I'm what you'd call an artisan, see? And there's nothing special about me, except that I've just won some money on the pools.'

'Really?' Moore was nervous now. 'I do congratulate you on that. And it's quite a lot?'

'Well, that's comparative, like I say. Call it about twelve thousand a year.' Phil paused again as he saw the young man's eyes narrow on him. 'It's along of being a big winner that I got to know Mr Prendick personal. And Jean – Miss Canaway.'

'Ah, yes. What fun Miss Canaway's job must be. It brings her into contact with all sorts, doesn't it?'

'Just that,' Phil said. 'Shows her a new world, like, from time to time. And she likes it.'

There was again a short silence. Phil had actually got himself up and into a chair. He had no fancy for any more Is-the-poor-beggar-bad stuff from Moore.

But Moore had made a movement to assist him that was honest and spontaneous enough. And now he'd taken a walk across the room before turning to look at Phil again in real perplexity. That about contact with all sorts had been a nasty one – but then Phil had asked for it. Phil didn't like Moore. In fact he hated him. But Moore had some sort of arrogant code that meant at least he'd never tell a lie – or only when they made him a cabinet minister or an ambassador or something like that. He'd always have a kind of bloody-minded straightness.

'Look,' Moore said, 'they've probably hit you on the head, among other places. But don't let that – or coming into a fortune – start you imagining things.'

'Thanks a lot,' Phil said. Since he knew very well there was something he *hadn't* imagined he didn't think he need much bother his head about Moore.

'Yes,' Moore said. 'Miss Canaway's job is quite a jolly one. But she does often work fearfully hard. Late hours at the office.'

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That's what's happened this evening. She changed here at the last moment, and I came to pick her up. Dinner-dance affair.'

'Yes, I see,' Phil said. He still wasn't much caring. Sir Aubrey Moore, he was thinking. was two things. There was a lot behind him that made him pretty formidable. At the same time, he was no more than the kid who could be outpointed by that crawling little shopkeeper to the gentry, old Melchizedek. 'I shan't keep you,' Phil said. 'Nice of Jean' – he paused on this – 'to think of a doctor. But you two can be getting along.'

'We shall, if you don't mind. After – that's to say – we've put you in safe hands, Mr –?'

'Name's Tombs,' Phil said. 'Phil Tombs.' He waited.

'Mr Tombs,' Moore said – and Phil realized his kind wouldn't make the cemetery joke anyway. 'May I tell you something in confidence?' Young Moore was now perfectly grave. 'We do want – Jean and I – to make this a bit of an occasion tonight. Because, you see, we've just got engaged.'

'Engaged?' Phil said. For a moment the word just didn't register. He'd got it in a context like it was something about getting a job. Then he took hold of the idea. 'No kidding?' he said.

Sir Aubrey Moore – him they called Dolly because he had a face like that – frowned. There was in him, among other things, just this 'anxious kid. And he was looking troubled again, as if he kind of knew something. Could he – Phil wondered – have seen Jean doing what she'd done? But it couldn't be that, or he'd be different. It was just that he had an instinct that Phil – discovered kicked, belted, and bloody in that lift – was in Jean's picture like he couldn't see how. That was why he'd come out with this about their engagement.

'Honest?' Phil asked.

'I give you my word of honour on it.'

That rocked Phil. He didn't know people said such things – except only in books.

'You got engaged to marry Jean, just minutes before you found me?'

'Just that. Odd, wasn't it?' Moore was probably trying to tell

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himself he was looking at Phil coolly. 'In the circumstances, you were quite a shock.'

'I'm kind of engaged, too,' Phil said. 'Nothing very definite in the way of diamond rings and *The Times*, you know. In my class it doesn't happen like that, it doesn't.' Remarkably, he'd managed to get to his feet. 'Still, I'd say it was shaping that way. So we can congratulate each other, like.' He was getting unsteadily across the room. 'I'll be moving. Tell her – tell Miss Canaway – I don't need that doctor. I quite often get beaten up like this, I do.' He'd got to the door, but with very little idea of what he was saying. 'It's just them things you read about. Sadism. Masochism. What you lot get out of yourselves with canes and that at school. We're backward.' His hand was – blessedly – on the door handle. 'Seeing you,' he said, and turned it.

'Oh, I say!' Sir Aubrey Moore had stepped indecisively forward. 'You can't go off like this. You're not fit. Jean will be furious if –' He was trying to put a hand on Phil's arm.

'Do you mind?' Phil had never got it out more arrogant. Moore fell back. A minute, and Phil was in that lift.

He braced himself in a corner of it as it went down. He wondered about the little porter. He wondered if he had the strength to clout him one as he went past. But he'd be off duty by now. Or more likely he'd have cleared out for good. Come to think of it, his game was up the minute Phil had refused to play ball with Hannay and his crowd. As for that lot, Phil could have them all in gaol, all right. They could plead self-defence for the beginning of the beating up. But not for McLeod's bleeding joke of dumping him in Prendick's lift. They wouldn't get away with that one. They'd be put inside, for certain.

He knew all this didn't mean a thing. Hannay and all were no more than a bit of rotten past he'd never think of again – not unless he woke up bad in the night. Sooner or later they'd be jugged, sure as sure, and bad luck to them. But he'd done his job. In getting away that girl called herself Beryl he'd done his job. What he'd better be doing now, he wasn't clear

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about. Get back to his auntie's, perhaps. That prosperous provincial's twenty-four hours in London was over. Put it like that.

He had two shocks when he got outside. The first was that it was dark, or nearly dark, and that he'd no kind of idea where he was. There was a great street, and traffic roaring by, and he couldn't really tell himself anything about it. Something must have happened in his head. There were these neon signs, but they didn't say the names of streets or towns or anything. They just said about whisky and soft drinks and cigarettes. Only there was one kept saying what looked something more connected, and he stood looking at it for a long time before he got the idea that it was giving you the news. There was something about a pit disaster and something about cricket. It came to him that if you wanted to play the pools now – and he had an idea he sometimes played the pools – you had to do it about what was happening in Australia. And then he saw Artie Couatts kind of swimming in front of him and saying something about suburbs in Sydney. And then his mind came perfectly clear, so that he knew that for some reason he was walking round and round London.

The second shock was when he had a good idea. He could stop walking and hail a taxi and say 'Paddington' and it would all be as good as over. For if you could say 'Paddington' on the pavement here you could say 'Oxford' at a booking office and it wasn't easy to see how, after that, things could go wrong. Or not more wrong than they'd gone. Only Phil was accustomed to being not all that flush – it was less than a year ago that he'd come out of apprentice school and started making big money – and he usually consulted his pockets before a decisive move in the financial line. It's what he'd failed to do, being kind of worked up, that evening before he'd gone into the Pompador. But he did it now. He decided he'd count his money. It was a bit of a joke that, really – because he knew that he had more than fifty nicker on him. Even if he didn't know *why*, he knew that. So he felt in his pockets. And he discovered he had nothing at all.

It was a filthy trick to have played him, he thought. To have



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knocked out a tooth and cut his scalp open and bunged up an eye and tried to spoil his matrimonial chances was one thing. But to have gone through his pockets afterwards was another. It would be Hotchkiss did that – he decided with a clear flash of knowledge. Rather compassionate, Hotchkiss had been. And felt entitled to cash down.

And somehow it took the use out of him, this being alone in London without a penny. In fact it put panic in him. He wasn't thinking how the skies had fallen, the unbelievable gate had closed again. He was just thinking he was without money. Something deep in his training – his nurture, you might say – made a horrible fear out of it. It would have meant nothing to Sir Sodding Aubrey Moore. If Moore found himself in the middle of Detroit or Tokyo without a bean, he'd do no more than feel annoyed. And he'd do some commonplace thing about it. Phil, although he hardly remembered who Moore was, knew that. You went to the police, he supposed. And when they were clear you weren't tight, or on the run, they gave you a cup of tea and some blankets, and fixed you up good-humoured, like you were their long-lost moron nephew. Panic, all the same.

He thought people were looking at him. And he thought, That won't do. Walk on. Ignore. Marble Arch, Bayswater Road, walk to Oxford, A 40. But he was some place quite quiet – it must have been a side-street – when things began going round on him. He could manage, while they just went round slowly. Only they went faster – and then they went up and down as well. It was like the Whip – the one that accelerates as it corners, and that only some kind of centrifugal force keeps your back glued to as it swings.

Then the force failed, and he was flying through space.

'What's your name?' the old chap asked.

'Phil Tombs.'

'What's your address?'

Phil told him.

'What day of the week is it?'

'Monday.'

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'Can you remember what you were doing at eleven o'clock this morning?'

'I was in the train, coming to London.'

The old chap straightened up, and spoke to somebody behind him.

'All right there, too,' he said. 'If there was a bit of concussion, it's gone. And – as I said, nothing broken. But I'm not sure you oughtn't to have in the police.'

'No!' Phil said – loudly, as he believed. 'I'll be boggered if I have the dicks.'

'I think it's for him to say, you know.' A familiar voice spoke from somewhere outside Phil's range of vision. 'Unless you insist, Doctor, as you've a right to do.'

'Have it your own way.' Phil could see that the old chap was stowing something away in a black bag. 'He could have fallen down a flight of steps, I suppose. For legal purposes, that is to say.'

'That's what I done,' Phil said. His Oxford Varsity grammar wasn't standing up to this business of coming to his senses in two successive unknown environments. But he was quite clear about the police.

'Then good evening to you,' the doctor said briskly. And he went out.

Phil struggled into a sitting position. It was becoming quite an act with him. And he stared at Mark Thickthorne.

'Here,' he said, '– what is this, anyway? How'd I come here?'

He was in a bedroom about the size of his own bedroom at home. It had the same sort of sloping roof and attic window. The furnishing wasn't so good. At least it wasn't anything like so new. There were two chairs that had once been painted white and that had tattered silk on them, like you might see in a museum. There was an old battered cupboard with gold on the corners, and there was a small old dark picture of a man on a horse, and another man holding its head, and a big house in the background – but you could see that what the chap had been told to paint was the horse. The bed he was on was quite small, but it was the queer old kind that has a lid to it, like you

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might expect it was going to rain and didn't trust your roof. There wasn't much else.

'Some people brought you,' Thickthorne said. 'Sensible of them. Of course, they found you only a hundred yards away. Coming to see me, were you? I was hoping you would. Seems you were robbed. Shall you be all right for a few minutes? I'm going to make some coffee. The old saw-bones said you could have that.'

'I was robbed, all right.' Phil stretched both his arms, and found they weren't hurting too badly. He looked at Thickthorne in wonder. Thickthorne looked back at him without any wonder – as if this whole affair was absolutely nothing out of the way. 'Robbed and clobbered,' Phil said. 'But how did anybody know to bring me here? Your home, is it?'

'Not exactly. Just a useful hide-out I keep in town. My idea rather is to take you home, if by any chance you'd care to come.' Thickthorne grinned cheerfully. 'A few days to repair that damage. We could talk. And with my father too. You'd like him, I think. Same sound ideas.'

Phil couldn't think that he had any ideas, sound or otherwise. But he ought to be grateful.

'Thanks a lot,' he said. 'And coffee will be just the job. But I still don't see –'

'How they got you here? It was frightfully lucky. Whoever robbed you left just one thing in your pockets. Remember? I gave you a visiting card at Paddington.'

'A visiting card?' Phil said. It didn't mean a thing to him.

'Here it is.' Thickthorne picked up a battered scrap of paste-board from a little table and handed it to Phil as he went out of the room.

Phil looked at it. He had one eye in working order to do that with. And he saw that the thing read:

LORD MARK THICKTHORNE

*Thickthorne Court*

*Notts.*

## PART THREE: COUNTRY HOUSES

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### *Chapter Eighteen*

THERE were things made Phil nervous on the railway journey next morning. He'd never travelled with a lord – not with any lord at all, let alone one you had to keep an eye on about the communication cord. Then there was how he himself still looked. Just one scrap of trouble with a guard this time, he was sure, and they'd both be run in at once. Not that he minded having a few matters to worry about, if they took his mind off Jean. Forget it, was the only advice he could give himself over *that* – or anyway forget it for now. She'd been carried away like she hadn't ought to have been, and he'd have to think of it – what she'd done in that astounding second – as showing what can happen when it gets to a bit of violence. He didn't blame her. He wouldn't have her not be a bit primitive. But that it had been some queer reflex from his blood on her hand – well, that was a thing you had to think about. But better not get thinking yet.

He'd taken to this Thickthorne, all right – and Thickthorne seemed to have taken to him. At first Phil had been afraid that as well as being a lord he might be a bore – gassing about his gas-projects all the time. But it wasn't like that. He talked a bit about it but not a lot, so that Phil finished the journey quite feeling he'd like to hear more. Lord Thickthorne – if that's what he was, but he'd said with a laugh it wasn't exactly that – had a wild, roving kind of mind. He talked about everything with a quick interest you might think was put on as a kind of politeness, only Phil felt it wasn't just a hundred-per-cent that. He was full of curiosity about things Phil might think. In fact the only thing he *wasn't* curious about was what Phil *was*. He had rather the air that he and Phil had been at school together round about the age of six, and that whatever had happened to each of them since that time could perfectly comfortably keep. There was a bad patch when Phil felt that this was a sort

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of coming it over him that he didn't like. Then it occurred to him that it *was* politeness, this was – but not in the least of a chilly keep-your-distance sort. Finally, there was the fact that Mark Thickthorne was mad. Nobody who wasn't mad could have done that on the train the day before. Phil hadn't ever liked madness. In fact he'd always thought it could be worse than anything – worse, even, than something beginning to change inside your bones because of fall-out. Mark Thickthorne was suddenly showing him you could be mad and vivid and gay. Anyway, if you were a mad *scientist*. All the mad scientists Phil had read about were very sinister indeed. So he found this one doing him quite a lot of good.

He liked, for instance, hearing about the Sargent Society. Sargent was a declassy American railroad-king, it seemed, in a story by Rudyard Kipling, and Kipling had made out how unspeakably low-class he was by having him stop an English express train at the bottom of his garden because he wanted to board it and get to London. Thickthorne, it turned out, didn't like Kipling. He liked Sargent. And the Sargent Society was going to be an Anti-British-Railways affair, and anybody who belonged to it had to promise to eat a pound of coal for every pound he used except in liquid form. Of course it was alarming to hear Thickthorne getting off on this tack. Still, when he shouted with laughter, Phil shouted too – and then in a minute Thickthorne would be off again about the critical temperature of ethylene or the residual problems of radiation in double-walled vessels. Their journey, although it involved having lunch on the train, seemed to take no time at all. The place they got off at was called Thickthorne. It gave Phil quite a queer feeling, that. Getting excited about the aristocracy, he told himself sardonic. But he didn't really feel that way about this chap.

They were to be met, Thickthorne had said – and Phil had wondered by what. If you're a lord then your father's a duke, he supposed. Unlike poor old Hannay, you probably do really have a second Rolls. But all that was at this little station was a girl with a pony and trap. Thickthorne called it the governess-car, so Phil decided the girl must be the governess. But she

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seemed a bit young for it, and quite soon it turned out she was Mark's kid sister. She was like Mark, for that matter, in the way she looked at you without any appearance of doing sums. That – it occurred to him oddly – made her different both from Beryl and from Jean. But then she was only a kid – this Alice Thickthorne was – that you'd never think of looking at except innocent like.

'How do you do?' Alice said crisply, and shook hands as if she was entirely grown-up. She took a good look at Phil's face. 'Come a purler, haven't you?' she added without notable anxiety.

'Yes,' Phil said. 'Just about that.'

Was the horse all right? This time, Alice sounded rather more concerned.

'Nonsense, Alice,' Mark said. 'You've only one idea in your head. And Tombs hasn't been on a horse.'

'Never have been,' Phil said cheerfully to the kid. 'Except wooden,' he added.

'I've got a wooden one still,' she said. This was mildly puzzling Phil when she added: 'Where's your luggage?'

'I haven't got any,' he said. This second confession rather confused him.

'No clothes and things?' She was quite matter-of-fact. 'But you can have Mark's. He hardly ever wears any. I mean, he hardly ever bothers to change, or wash, or anything like that.'

'That so?' Phil said. He was surprised. He'd always supposed that lords felt it due to their position to have three baths a day. 'I got some clothes at home,' he added rather inconsequently.

'Where's that?' Alice had opened a minute door in the governess-car and waved Phil in.

'Oxford.'

'Oh, yes. I'm supposed to be going there the year after next. If I have the brains, which is held doubtful. Would you like to drive?'

'Yes, I'll drive,' Phil said.

And, somehow, he did. When he pulled the reins in the

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wrong way and the pony came to a halt, it was natural to say something about the communication cord. And Alice seemed to understand at once.

'Mark, you great idiot!' she said. 'Not again?'

'He done it,' Phil said. 'But we got away with it.'

They all shouted with laughter. And the pony, taking this as a signal, walked on. He didn't really need attending to, because he was now in a country lane that he knew quite as well as the Thickthornes did. Not that the scene was entirely rural. Hovering on all its horizons were pit-heads, factory chimneys and smudges of smoke. Phil found it well-balanced and agreeable. But Alice seemed to divine that he was a person of urban background.

'I'm afraid this is a bit slow,' she said. 'But it will be a year, you see, before I'm old enough to have a licence to drive the car on public roads. But of course *I can* drive. So I can take you round the park, if you like. There are great rivers of bluebells in some places now.'

'Bluebells?' Phil said. It was a queer one that, somehow. 'Do you find that people come in and – tear them up?'

'Oh, yes – most atrociously. But I go after them with the dogs.'

'I see,' Phil said. He was thinking it was queer, too, that this child must be the same age as the clueless little tart-in-the-making he'd managed to haul out of McLeod's place. 'Big dogs?' he asked.

'Absolutely enormous. Mastiffs, St Bernards, Elk Hounds, Irish Wolf Hounds – and, of course, the Seven Sisters.'

'The Seven Sisters?' Phil was impressed and alarmed.

'They're my very own seven Bloodhound bitches.'

'She's talking utter nonsense,' Mark Thickthorne said. He spoke as if this, in a Thickthorne, was pretty well unheard of. 'But here's the drive. We'll be there in half an hour.'

The Thickthornes' father – who was going to turn out, rather bewilderingly, to be Lord Braydon to you and the Marquis of Braydon to strangers – was walking up and down an enormous mouldering terrace, fighting intrusive weeds with a flame-gun. The house behind him was clearly the big house in

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the painting in Mark Thickthorne's bedroom in London – only it had grown yet bigger, and decidedly more shabby, since the painting had been done. Lord Braydon himself was small but not shabby. His tweeds were as good as Phil's, and had the advantage of not having been through a fight to the death. When he saw the governess-car he extinguished the flame-gun and came across at once.

'How do you do?' Lord Braydon said. He spoke with affable vagueness – until he took a look at Phil's face. 'I hope the brute hadn't to be shot?' he then added earnestly.

'Tombs hasn't been riding,' Mark said. 'He's been robbed.'

'So have I – for years.' Lord Braydon, as he shook hands, appeared to feel that here was a bond established between Phil and himself at the start. 'You won't, I judge, have read my *Thoughts on Rent*. If I can find a copy and persuade you to turn it over, I shall value your comments on it. I worked it up from one or two things I said in the House of Lords. Are you interested in apples?'

'I don't know much about them,' Phil said.

'Capital. We must certainly take a walk through the orchards. It is an area in which the impact of fresh minds is badly needed. Sir Isaac Newton was, I suppose, the last man to give the apple any serious attention. But first we must have some tea. Alice, my dear, persuade somebody to make tea, while Mark shows his friend to his room. Later we will take a little stroll through the labs. Mr Tombs won't fail to be interested in our improved cascade process, to say nothing of the new continuous vertical retort house. But of course' – Lord Braydon added by way of courteous afterthought – 'there are one or two other things, if your interest happens to be in their direction. Several marbles an ancestor of mine had on the quiet from a fellow called Elgin. And a Poussin that came to us at the time of the d'Aumale marriage.'

'The level pointing finger,' Alice said suddenly, 'and the horses of the sun.'

'Particularly the horses,' Mark said. 'They're as wooden as the one in the nursery, which is why Alice adores them.'

'I see,' Phil said. And in a way he did. He didn't, that is to



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say, find these mild mysteries awkward. It came, he supposed, of their being nice people, Mark Thickthorne's lot.

And there was nothing, of course, to surprise Phil in Thickthorne Court. He'd been through plenty such places with Beryl at half a crown a time. It wasn't as big as Blenheim Palace, although the idea was very much the same. There was a bus-load of people being trailed through it now, and it did seem a bit queer to Phil to catch a glimpse of them at the far end of a room, barred off by a long red rope.

'You coming into all this?' he asked Mark. He was wondering how much of the property you could buy for a quarter of a million nicker. Not, of course, that he felt drawn that way. No occasion for places of this sort now. The Thickthornes, he supposed, must feel much as Noah's grand kids did about the outsize houseboat down at the bottom of the garden. Distinguished, in a historical way. But hard to know what to do with.

'Come into Thickthorne? Good lord, no,' Mark appeared to see this as obvious, although Phil couldn't understand why. 'My brother will do that. But he's away at present, governing some islands. Now, here's your room, and that's mine, over there. You'll find you do have a bathroom – although you'll also find we don't contrive to do anything much in a Ritz way. If you go and wash, I'll start looking out some clothes.' Mark Thickthorne smiled happily at his guest. 'Including some pretty old ones, so that we can do a bit of real mucking around.'

'I use a boiler suit most times for that,' Phil said. 'But anything will do.'

'Boiler-suits are quite a line with us,' Mark said with increasing satisfaction. 'We're workers, you know. Or rather you don't. You think we're quite agreeable eccentrics, spending easy wealth on a hobby or fad. Isn't that right?'

Phil felt himself blushing.

'I never said that, I didn't,' Phil thought that his rather pitiful confusion must be redressed. 'Here,' he said, 'what do I call you, like? Your lordship – that proper?'

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Mark Thickthorne's chuckles turned to loud inoffensive laughter. 'It wouldn't do at all. You'd find it disconcert the servants. There still seem to be a few around, from time to time. I'd be pleased if you tried out Mark.'

'Can do,' Phil said rather gruffly. 'But what about your dad?'

'Just Lord Braydon – but not too often. "Sir" would be all right too. He's getting reconciled to it.'

'Reconciled to it?' Phil supposed that the march of democracy must be involved in this.

'Well, it shows he's getting a bit elderly. Not that my brother and I haven't always called him that.'

That seemed to Phil about the queerest of the lot. But of course he didn't show it.

'And that kid sister?' he asked.

'You'll call her Alice, if you call me Mark.'

'Then that's fixed, Mark. All clear.'

Mark Thickthorne shook his head.

'It isn't all clear,' he said. 'Not till you see we're skilled men, my father and I. Then we'll call it quits, Phil.'

Phil did see, and did have to call it that. It wasn't that he didn't know his Properties of Gases. If you'd asked him 'Is it technically sound to assume that real gases are perfect?' he'd have answered at once, and if you'd said 'Write a short essay distinguishing between the theoretical contributions of Boyle and Charles' the probability is that he'd have got pretty well everything right except the spelling. He'd have known, too, that it was in west Yorkshire that they pioneered piping gas over long distances, and he'd have had a good deal to say – in fact, he said it – about the gap between that simple sort of operation and Mark Thickthorne's extravagant visions. But of course he wasn't either a chemist or an engineer, and although he ended the day feeling it would be a good idea to be both, he ended it with his head swimming as well. It was true that when he'd examined the working model of the Thickthorne improved cascade process he'd seen at once how the expansion valves could be improved. But then he'd done Refrigeration at

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the 'Tec – it being a pretty good thing to do – and of course a cascade process is nothing but refrigeration in a big way. He'd have done better, he knew, if the Thickthorne passion had been for electricity. Still, he didn't exhibit himself as a fool, and when he was out of his depth he said so.

There was one thing he noticed that interested him quite a lot. The first time he'd met Mark, Mark had done that freakish thing on the train. Well, there was something of the same sort built right into his mind, and it came out every now and then in his handling of a technical problem. Once or twice, that is to say, Phil was aware of what you might call a brilliant solution of a difficulty that wasn't there. No harm in it among all these beautifully made working models. But cutting that sort of caper, Phil thought, would have to go when you got commercial.

He said so. Rather surprisingly that made Mark angry – in fact he glowered at Phil rather as if Phil was something particularly irritating on the railways, say the Devonian or the Cathedrals Express. So Phil said it again, adding a bit more chapter and verse. At which Mark calmed down. But Phil noticed Lord Braydon looking a bit thoughtful for a time. He hoped he hadn't offended this nice old boy by coming down like that on his son.

He found he had another date before he got his dinner that night. Alice, who seemed indignant at Mark's jokes about her caring for nothing but horses, was determined to prove to Phil that she had command over other means of locomotion. So there at the bottom of a great flight of steps was a car. It was a Rolls-Royce all right, and it looked as if it might have been made when Royce and Rolls were at about the same stage of their inventive careers as Mark Thickthorne and his father were now. But Phil had no doubt that it would have done London to Brighton nicely, and unless Alice was so inexperienced that she took them into a tree there didn't seem to be much risk in going with her round a nobleman's park. Lord Braydon gave them a casual wave as they went down the drive. It seemed he didn't think it at all out of the way that this kid should take charge of an affair like a young battleship. But then –

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Phil thought – you're thinking of her as more of a kid than she is. They're different, this lot.

'There's a church and a village,' Alice said rapidly. 'There's a Belvedere and a Temple of the Winds and a Gothic Cow House and a Hermit's Grot. Which first?'

'The House for Gothic Cows,' Phil said. 'They're my favourites, like. Jerseys or Herefords aren't a patch on Gothics.'

She turned to look at him suspiciously – so that the Rolls swayed alarmingly about the drive. Her inspection seemed to satisfy her.

'Funny Man,' she said witheringly, and drove on.

Phil felt he'd better be serious.

'What's a Belvedere?' he asked.

'Well – it's round, and it has pillars.' She looked at him rather uncertainly this time. 'Don't you *know*?'

'No – I don't know much, I don't. Why's it called a Belvedere?'

'I'm sure *I* don't know.' Alice shoved vigorously on the accelerator. 'You ought to, if you're at Oxford.'

'At Oxford? *I'm* not at Oxford. I'm *from* Oxford. Don't you know the difference?' Phil found it fun, teasing this kid. She was a nice kid.

'You mean you're not *up*?' She smiled at him as she hazardously swung the wheel. 'Well – if that isn't a relief. I can't *beár* undergraduates. Aren't they too *bloody* superior?'

Phil was a good deal shocked by this freedom of language on the part of the infant sister of a lord. At the same time, he felt that she said something abundantly true.

'But I got an undergrad friend,' he said, 'who says I *ought* to go up. Only it would take about a couple of years, I reckon. On account of my education being a bit irregular, like.'

'Two years? That's what it's going to take me – if I work disgustingly hard.' She considered. 'Phil – what joy. We'd be freshmen together. You'd take me to my first Commem. ball. Oh, what ecstasy!' She put out a hand and pointed. 'Look,' she said gravely. 'A Gothic cow.'

The Gothic cow was a deer. They had a lot of quite senseless fun, driving about this park together. It was a big park, and

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here and there it had these buildings – temples and *the like* – put up just for show. They looked pretty, all right, in a low evening sun. Alice said there were coal-mines under the whole park, and that for generations the Thickthornes had lived on them, which was why her father and Mark thought it would be a good idea to get some sense into English coal now.

‘Squeeze it until it drips, or something,’ Alice said. She didn’t seem scientifically minded. ‘And I expect they’ll manage it. Particularly Mark. He’s got my mother’s brains, they say.’

‘Your mother?’ Phil asked. This was something he’d been wondering about.

‘She died when I was quite young,’ Alice said briefly. ‘The question is whether I’m going to make a life running Thickthorne for Rupert. Rupert’s my eldest brother.’

‘He’ll get married, won’t he?’

‘Oh, no. Rupert’s not interested in women. A pity – but there it is. He runs some islands at present. And he does some painting. Mostly of young coffee-coloured divinities. Male.’

‘I see.’ Phil felt it wouldn’t be a good idea for Alice to make a life running things for a chap like that. And he felt a bit held up again by this directness of speech in a school-kid. He wanted to say ‘What about you – are you interested in *men*?’ But he thought he wouldn’t – not in what you might call this particular conversational context. ‘What’s all that?’ he asked, pointing.

‘That’s the village. We’re going to drive through it.’

‘You got a village *inside* the park?’ This struck Phil as extremely remarkable. ‘I thought lords kept villages *outside*. Kind of nestling up against the gates. What do the villagers do – milk the Gothic cows or exercise all your enormous dogs?’

Alice laughed. She had a very generous attitude in estimating wit.

‘They go to church on Sundays. There’s the church, beyond those trees, and there’s the vicarage. During the week they work in the market-gardens and greenhouses. We have all that inside the ring-fence too. In fact, we’re a very self-contained community at Thickthorne. Look at that.’

What they were looking at now was acres of glass-houses. They ran through these and came to a smithy and a saw-mill

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and a second little village that was mostly the kind of workshops you need, he supposed, about an estate. It all looked fairly prosperous – so that he wondered why it wouldn't run to a good lick of paint over Thickthorne Court itself. The place needed it. And the whole set-up made Phil thoughtful after a time. It was a little world, all right.

'Your dad reckon on being a rich man?' he asked.

'Oh, no – I'd say not.' Alice didn't seem to find this question too fresh. 'Quite a lot of the people round about have much smaller places, but seem a good deal richer, all the same.'

'And them with no places at all,' Phil said, 'are the richest of the lot. Proletarian drones, coddled by the state.'

But this bit of nonsense rather misfired. Alice had flushed up, and was making the enormous Rolls take a corner viciously.

'We don't talk like that. Daddy would call it most frightfully bourgeois.' She glanced sideways at Phil quite furiously – but as she did so the mischief came again into her eyes. 'But then I suppose you are that, aren't you, Phil? A solid middle-class boy? I think it's marvellous of Mark to have discovered you. Or am I wrong? I'm a sheltered child. I wouldn't really know.'

Phil made no reply. He just sat back and grinned. This was partly because he was disconcerted. But partly it was because he saw that the kid wouldn't have gone on to just this joke if they weren't really friends. He didn't speak again until they were on their way back to the house.

'Actually,' he said, 'I'm a mystery man. Honest.'

And this was true, after all. For he'd realized that these people had no notion he was Prendick's big winner of the season. If Mark Thickthorne *had* discovered him, it had been without a clue as to that.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

A VERY old man appeared at dinner. But he didn't sit down. He turned out to be the butler. Phil wasn't sure that this old man wasn't a shade anxious about him. Not disapproving – certainly nothing like that – but just keeping alert to see that

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nothing went too badly wrong. This made Phil conclude that Mark Thickthorne didn't make a habit of picking up young artisans – even disguised artisans – in railway carriages. Not that he'd really thought that – not even fleetingly until Alice had told him that about her brother Rupert. What Phil really had in common with Mark, perhaps, was a liability suddenly to do fool things. Just at this moment, for instance, he felt a temptation to start eating peas with a knife. It was hard to see how it could be done, but he'd heard of it. He wanted to see if it would produce a kind of armed intervention on the part of the old butler. But of course he didn't carry out the experiment. It wouldn't be polite, a kind of fooling like that.

So anyway he knew when not to fool. He wasn't too sure that Mark did. Or rather it was just that the favourite bees in Mark's bonnet would get buzzing at any time. This about railways, for instance. There wasn't too much sense in that.

'You'd think they were wicked,' Phil said grinning, 'to hear you talk, you would. And you'd think coal was wicked, so long as it stayed black and solid. But it's the same stuff – isn't it? – after you've turned it into a clear liquid in those labs. Molecules moving at a different speed – that's all. Nothing to get heated about. It's furnaces and things we've got to get heated. But more efficiently by a good margin than by those old boiler nuts. That's our point. And I'm not confident your margin looks too good. Break down the cost of the solid black stuff at the point of combustion, and you won't find the rail transport comes to all that. It comes to something – and there's your chance. But coal's not wicked, and railways aren't, either. God don't think permanent ways any worse than temporary ones. You got to keep that in your head, Mark.'

And Mark got furious again. He banged the table, so that the old butler had to come forward indulgently and mop up a ring of claret.

'Nonsense!' he shouted. 'Don't tell me it isn't wicked to waste the shrinking natural resources of this elderly planet. We've got to start from there. We've got to convince industry and finance of it. See?'

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'That's all my eye,' Phil said. 'I never met industry, and not finance either. But don't tell me they listen to stuff like that. Line their pockets is what they want.'

'I'm afraid that's very true,' Lord Braydon said. 'Our proposals are essentially a matter for the legislature. I must make another strong speech in the Lords.'

'That's all my eye, too,' Phil said. He caught the old butler looking at him. 'Sir,' he added hastily.

'You really think so?' Lord Braydon appeared perfectly willing to be impressed. 'It's true that I've got no very pronounced response upon previous occasions. Coal, nowadays, is rather a bureaucratic affair. There is this Board, and so on. Keen minds, I have no doubt. But I fear they don't see the need of revolution. Do you know that most of my neighbours now heat their places on imported oil? If that doesn't show —'

'What you heat Thickthorne on?' Phil asked.

Alice, who was preparing to leave the room, turned round at this.

'That's the family skeleton,' she said. 'Can't you hear it rattling in the cellars? You would, in winter. The stuff's called Thickthorne Particular. It's quite beautiful. But it's certainly solid coal — black, black coal.' She smiled at Phil. 'This is when I do all those dogs,' she said. And she went out.

'And here's Mark,' Phil said, 'talking about tankers and the problem of colonial markets. Right in the clouds, that is. You got to learn to walk before you run, I say.' If he faintly hesitated, it was from remembering that it wasn't all that time ago that he'd thought poorly of this proposition as it came from Artie Coutts. 'And there's your patents,' he said. 'You've got to mind your step about those. I've heard of chaps got had proper there, I can tell you. You can't invent anything, it seems, that it don't pay someone to get from you some mean way and just lock up. You got to look out for crooks pretty well all the time.' Recent experience helped Phil to give a good deal of weight to this statement. 'And go ahead on your own.'

'Go ahead with what?' Lord Braydon asked. He could be very much to the point at times, could the old boy.



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'A pilot scheme,' Phil said. And suddenly he was very much excited. 'Right here inside what Alice calls the ring-fence.'

'A pilot scheme?' It seemed Lord Braydon wasn't familiar with the phrase.

'Yes. I mean Yes sir.' And Phil banged the table, just as if he was Mark. 'Not just models and that. Mark's British Omnigas serving a whole small community. Basic in an economy, like. It doesn't matter about the coal – where it comes from or what it costs. Assume your basic commodity – see? It's the figures for your subsequent processes people will be interested in. Make your liquid gas anywhere in the park – in a Gothic Cow House, if you like. Pipe it here, and run the whole place on it. Pipe it to the village, and run that. And to the smithy and the saw-mill. Pipe it to the church and let it run the organ. Everything! And all scaled down – see? Like a miniature railway. And showing that granted your coal – it's economic all the time. I got a friend could do the economics. So we'd have the Thickthorne Court Pilot Scheme. We'd have Japs and Germans on our doorstep in no time, making inquiries with their tongues hanging out. They'd have to think about it then – the House of Lords and the Coal Board and all. So why not?'

And Lord Braydon nodded.

'I can think of one or two why-nots,' he said. 'But why not, all the same. Eh, Mark?'

It was only for a second that Mark Thickthorne hung fire. Then he gave a shout of glee.

'That's it!' he said. 'And within five years there won't be a ton of solid coal trundling across England.'

'Not half, there won't,' Phil said. And he shook his head at Mark like he might have been an indulgent parent. 'But we might get a start, all the same.'

After that there were whole days when Phil's life seemed to run miraculously clear. There were things he'd thought would never leave his mind that he now completely forgot. And he did amazing things. He sent his auntie a telegram with his address, saying he wouldn't be home yet. He sent another to

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Beryl while hardly remembering she was a problem – and, after all, she'd herself insisted that his business with Prendick's lot would take a week. He asked Mark if there was some way he could cash a cheque. And Mark, as usual without a flicker of curiosity, had got his father to ring up his banker. Then Phil had driven the Rolls into Nottingham – and, although the cheque was, he supposed, quite enormous as cheques go, the chap had handed Lord Braydon's guest the money without a flicker. Phil got back with two suitcases and with a box of chocolates for Alice. Nobody seemed to think anything of all this. He wrote a long letter and addressed it to 'Mr Peter Sharples, Oxford University', and the reply came so quickly that it was clear the Post Office had taken it in their stride. All the rest of the time he helped Mark plot what they called Operation Pilot. And then something happened.

It happened along with his morning tea – which was something that, rather to his confusion, a cheerful boy in a green apron brought to his bedside. One morning this boy wasn't only cheerful. He was very impressed as well. For there was an enormous bundle of letters for Phil. It was a large-scale forwarding operation which again showed the Oxford postal people as an efficient crowd. Phil's auntie – Phil was sure – would never have risen to coping with all this. Of course it was the same sort of stuff he'd had on the first day – including a follow-up letter from the titled lady with daughters. It happened she would be passing through Oxford, and she was sure Phil wouldn't mind if she called. Phil was pleased with the idea of that. He hoped the Griffin kids would manage to ask the daughters how their mum was off for dripping.

A lot of the letters he just didn't open. It was no longer part of his life, all that. But there was one that caught his eye as he was going to chuck it away. It had the sender's address in a corner. It was an address that made Phil suddenly shiver as he looked – for it brought into his mind a fountain, and a lot of black glass, and a chap advancing on him carrying an umbrella and gloves. Then it brought up something else as well, so that he felt his heart pounding. He opened the letter. It read:

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My dear Tombs,

I was so sorry to miss you when – as my secretary tells me – you were good enough to look in the other day I don't know whether I could have given you much useful advice But I could have assured you again that I take – believe me – a most friendly interest in your fortunes This is a strange business I find myself connected with Although it adds, we like to think, a great deal of harmless interest and excitement to the lives of many, I have to confess that I wonder sometimes about the simple good sense of putting such very large sums of money in the hands of – well, a very mixed lot That's why it has been such fun to get a sizeable wad of it into young and enterprising hands! Of course the Firm wishes you good luck But I do too

I wonder if you'd care, by any chance, to run down to my country place for the week-end? My wife would be delighted. Loose Chippings is about twelve miles from Kingham Junction, and of course we'd send a car to meet any train Just send a telegram.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur Prendick

Reading this letter may be said to have calmed Phil down. 'Unmoved' would be the word to describe him when he'd finished it Then he noticed the letters 'T O' in another hand at the bottom of the page, and his heart misbehaved again He turned over. There wasn't much It just said.

Do come I've things to say.

J C.

Phil got downstairs to find both Mark and his father at breakfast

'I got to go,' he said He was very confused He was glad Alice was away with her dogs or ponies or something 'To-day I got to go'

For the first time in their acquaintance, Mark Thickthorne looked at him in surprise

'Go?' he said 'Leave us?'

'Some friends I promised' Phil waved his letter rather feebly. 'The week-end, like.'

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'Oh, the week-end.' Mark's face cleared. 'Don't make it a long one, Phil. Get back on Monday.'

'I'll try,' Phil said. His voice wasn't right.

Lord Braydon looked up rather absently from his newspaper.

'And put your address in the book,' he said. 'Good habit.'

Phil nodded. He went over to the table where there were a lot of things on hot plates. He'd been eating enormously since Operation Pilot began. But this time, somehow, he didn't eat much.

### *Chapter Twenty*

WHEN Phil Tombs came to look back on Loose Chippings what always came first into the movie that seemed chiefly to constitute his unassuming mental processes was the stone mushrooms.

That was what they were – and there seemed no rational explanation of them. And there wasn't an irrational or magical explanation of them either. He'd read somewhere – perhaps it was in that Physician's Love-Play book – about phallic symbols. But if *that* was what they were they were pitiful squashy affairs: just a great half-circle of rather new and expensive stone mushrooms, say three feet high, round what Prendick called his sweep. Prendick said they were a Typical Feature of a Cotswold Manor – but beyond that he seemed a bit vague about them. Jean had a theory they were evolved from things you used to get on to horses from And Mrs Prendick – who came from the North and was the one Phil liked – thought they would be nicer if mingled with gnomes and pixies. You could get pixies and gnomes – brightly coloured and highly glazed – from an art-and-craft pottery near Burford. But Prendick didn't take to this idea. He seemed to feel that gnomes and pixies weren't quite class – not for a Cotswold Manor.

A Cotswold Manor was something you built in a kind of butter-coloured stone. You put a heavy stone roof on it, with a bit of a sag here and there that had puzzled Phil a lot at

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first, although later he saw that it was intended to give a *ye-olde* effect. There weren't any sags inside. Everything was on the level – like Prendick's business, you might say – except that in the suite for the very grandest visitors there was a bathroom with a bath sunk into the floor. There was a hall which was all very new stone mixed up with very old beams, and round it there were a lot of portraits of gents in wigs who must be Prendick ancestors. There was also a Family Tree. Phil knew it was that, because there was one at Thickthorne – only there, for some reason, it was kept not in the hall but in the boot-room where the boy in the green apron cleaned things. There was a sense in which the Prendicks were altogether higher-toned, you might say, than the Thickthornes.

There was something in all this that you could think about – and Phil might have done more thinking if he hadn't been a good deal distracted by the house-party. Prendick called it that. Mrs Prendick tried to call it 'our friends' – only you could feel that the poor lady hadn't the conviction that would carry it that way. Phil himself saw clear enough that it was a house-party. The ring of Jaguars with their noses down among those mushrooms had told him that as he was driven up to the house in Prendick's Jaguar. If he'd had the nerve, of course, he could have driven up in his own Jag. All he'd have had to do was to walk into the right place in Nottingham and tell them to register this one or that one quick. It tickled him, this did. But of course you should ask your girl before choosing a car. But who – he asked himself – did you ask before choosing your girl? Or – he dimly felt – letting a girl choose you?

He had no real doubts about the meaning of those six words on the back of Prendick's letter. It was on. Or at least *with one* Jean it was on. For the first thing you had to learn *about any* girl was that there were several of her. He'd had lunch with at least two Jeans – not to speak of meeting quite another one for about thirty seconds later on. So he was wary as well as confident when he met the person called Jean now.

But of course his blood was quickening as well. The time seemed centuries away when his imagination had seen her as different in kind from every other woman. She had everything

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— but now he knew just how he wanted it. She was the girl who had leant across that little table towards him so that he had caught the scent on her. She was the girl who had leant, too, over his battered body in a low-cut dress like for a ball, so that he'd known how quick her breath was going. And, for her, he was the corresponding sort of man. Right or wrong, it was like that now.

'That Moore here?' he asked. There wasn't any point in just doing polite talk.

She shook her head, and gave him that straight look that yet had the faint suggestion to it of doing sums.

'I think Dolly may have been asked. But he's rather shot his bolt with his Dean. The Oxford term's nearly over, and he won't get more leave. But don't let's talk about Dolly quite yet.'

'It's all one to me.' He had to catch hold of himself to make sure he continued to talk any kind of sense. It was because of the way they were allowing themselves to look at each other, that was. 'Didn't you tell your uncle about that night — how you found me in the lift, and all? His letter didn't look like you had.'

'No, I didn't. He didn't know Dolly was coming to collect me, for one thing.' She smiled wonderfully. 'And an efficient secretary doesn't bring her boss any minor worries.'

'You call having a crook porter like that a minor worry? I'll tell you his game. He was tied up —'

'I know.' She was impatient. 'I worked it out, more or less. But he won't be seen again. And you don't want to have to go into some law-court, do you, as the country lad who was had? Forget it, Phil. You remember you talked about going places?' She just hesitated. 'We'll go places this week-end. Borrow a car and go runs each day. It's nice country. We needn't tag around with all these people.'

'They're your lot, aren't they?'

This question had far more effect than, in his swimming head, he'd intended. It was like she'd pulled up suddenly on seeing a high fence. But then she was off again.

'They're bores!' she said. 'City stuffed-shirts and their over-dressed wives and ill-educated daughters.'

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'You well-educated?' he asked. He was just seeking information.

'Not really. I read the fashionable highbrow books. They read the fashionable lowbrow ones. There's not much difference. So perhaps they're my lot, as you say. Anyway, they're not so exciting as you are.' She put her chin back rather defiantly, and gave the same wonderful smile. 'And I don't suppose any of them are anything like as wealthy.'

He couldn't take this lightly.

'Jean,' he said, 'you'd like me a bit if I hadn't all that lolly?'

'Yes,' she said. And he could see that she meant it – although he could see, too, that she didn't somehow look happy as she said it. 'Yes. But not at first. That was just nonsense and – and a vulgar temptation. Afterwards, yes. I can show you. Kiss me.'

They were in a corner of Prendick's perfectly kept garden and he wondered what it could be that made him feel, for a fleeting moment, like they were on a stage. It was a large garden. But because Prendick's was such a large house-party, you couldn't be sure of not knocking up against people in any corner of it. Perhaps this was why, after all, she broke from him quickly.

'Drinks time,' she said. 'I help to get them around. We must go in.'

And there was, it turned out, a good deal of that sort of 'must' during the week-end. Perhaps it was because Jean was something like her uncle's social secretary as well. Perhaps it was because, since the Prendicks' own grown-up children were away, she was acting as daughter of the house too. Anyway, the house-party did a lot of claiming her. She disintegrated into it, you might say, so that it was difficult to get quite the whole of her out of it again. She was on these people's wave-length, and a switch to anything else was a jerk. Not that this was, for Phil, more than a small cloud. For of course he was himself *on* a cloud – a big cloud, and perhaps what his friend Peter Sharples would have called a gilt-edged one. He'd hardly have been troubled a bit, if he could at all have got along with the house-party himself.

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But he couldn't. Prendick was very kind. But Phil had a nasty feeling that he'd been edging round all these loudly talking, perpetually drinking people and telling them that they must be kind too. Some of them were all right, but most of them were what you'd call cordial in a way that made him want to get out of the room. Some of them stared curiously when they thought he wasn't looking. So the whole thing became awkward, and the awkwardness went right down. Phil couldn't manage naturally with the servants. Even the Prendicks' spoons and forks went wrong on him, so that he realized that he was in for Kipps's troubles after all.

He couldn't understand it at first, and he was furious with himself – which was something that didn't help him to pick up the little things you have to pick up cool and quick if you're not going to do something silly. He'd thought at first it would be like Thickthorne – that, in comparison with anything he'd known, these would be exactly the same sort of people. Like if you found yourself in China, he'd thought, you wouldn't know one Chinese tribe – if there *were* tribes in China – from another. But it wasn't so.

They weren't easy, Prendick's lot. It puzzled him as well as disconcerted him, so that in spite of an absorbing happiness or excitement he found that he had to try to use his brains to find out *why*. But it was like being a blind man on the job. The upper classes, you'd call them. But he saw that he hadn't even the beginnings of the sort of knowledge that would enable him to sort them out. He was sure that each of these washed and polished, confident-seeming men would approve of each of the others as having been to the right sort of school and all that. He was sure that all these screeching and commanding women had similar assurances as confident-like as if it was a trade-mark tattooed on their tightly corseted behinds. And yet they *weren't* confident. That was it. Males and females, they must have been like this – with their cars and country houses and dividends and directorships – for quite some time. With some it would be their dads that made it, and with others it would be their grand-dads. But they all had an uneasy feel that they were a jumped-up crowd. Almost it looked as if you



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had to be a Thickthorne – which meant, really, just a small lot of funnies badly in need of a lick of paint – before you could look another human being in the eye without starting to do sums on him. At least his own class wasn't like *that*, he thought. He hadn't illusions about the folk he'd been brought up with. It wouldn't even be honest to say that he liked them – not really. But at least they weren't always wondering about themselves.

It was queer, all right. Here he'd got Jean – or he knew he just had to do *that* to have her – and here he was caught up in a crude, half-baked vision of English society as a bleeding nightmare. The wealthy Phil Tombs would marry and have kids. And those kids' kids, after they'd been to Eton and Harrow and taken their sodding seats in what these people called the House, would be like these people were now. Christ, it made you glad the bloody thing would have fallen by then. When he got Jean away – as two or three times on Saturday and Sunday he did – he tried to tell her all this, for he was very excited and exultant and despairing. And she didn't seem to think he was talking nonsense – not from what might be called his point of view – but it seemed to make her more thoughtful than responsive. He realized that she was very clever. And he told her so, seeing he was going to tell her everything. She said poverty had sharpened up her wits a bit. He was rather shaken by that. He was again as he'd been in the restaurant – working unused muscles so hard that he didn't know when he'd crack. Only now there was this of her being, in snatches, passionately in his arms. It came into his head that if they were going to be sane together they'd better live on a desert island.

And then he had his talk with Mrs Prendick.

He hadn't expected Mrs Prendick to seek him out for that walk as she did. For what seemed nice about Mrs Prendick was that she behaved like she didn't really play. You wouldn't call her homely. She was beautifully dressed, and she moved about in a way that told you she was the lady of the house. But she somehow suggested that, whatever life was, she'd had

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it, and that now she was just putting in a bit of time quietly in the grandstand, waiting the close of play. Here they were, though, Mrs Prendick and Phil, walking down a long ride through woodland.

'Nice gardens and things you have here,' Phil said.

'Do you like them?' Mrs Prendick seemed pleased. 'I work in them a great deal during the week, when my husband is in town and I live quite quietly. Of course I have a lot of help, because Arthur insists that everything should be in very good order. Yet he doesn't really care for the garden. Perhaps it is because his grandfather was a gardener.'

Phil thought 'gardener' in this must mean like when you say 'a keen gardener'. So it didn't seem to make sense. And Mrs Prendick noticed he was puzzled.

'Gardener to a duke,' she said. 'But still – a gardener. His eldest son – Arthur's father – was put in a draper's shop. It was regarded as quite a step up.'

'I'd rather do gardens,' Phil said. He was a bit surprised by the old lady's starting in like this on family history.

'I quite agree. But at least it *led* to a step up. When Arthur's father died a few years ago, he was the owner of two very big shops – really, of two *firms*. It was a wonderful career.' Mrs Prendick paused, and sat down on a rustic seat. Then she patted the place beside her in a motherly way, so that Phil sat down too. 'A wonderful career,' she repeated with her qucer sort of detachment. 'And indeed Arthur has had a wonderful career too. You can see that from our friends – from the house-party. Only, of course, he married rather early.'

'I'd say he made a nice marriage,' Phil said.

'Thank you, my dear.' If Mrs Prendick was again pleased, she was also amused. He remembered that there are people so simple that they don't seem to have minds to get confused with. 'At least my parents were very nice people. I had a good home. For a time we were very poor. My father, you see, started his own little builder's business, and at first it didn't seem to answer. But my mother worked very hard, backing him up. We all had to do without things. And then, quite suddenly, and largely because of the war with the German

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Kaiser, we became very well off. It was then that Arthur and I were married. He has always been very good to me, for he is a really kind man. But sometimes when he looks at me down the long table, with all those people on each side of us, I think he may be feeling that I represent –' Mrs Prendick paused. 'Now, don't hurry me,' she said – although Phil was doing nothing of the sort. 'I found just the right words not long ago. Yes! A failure of nerve.' She looked at Phil, and he saw that her face was quite untroubled. 'He might have done better, poor man.'

Phil was horrified. He couldn't believe that, even if he too lived to be quite old, he'd ever come to talk of deep private things in this passionless way. He saw, of course, that Mrs Prendick had led the conversation this way at all only because she'd realized he was a bit at sea. She was wanting to tell him something about what you might call unknown England. He found he wasn't resenting this. But he did feel an instinct to go cautiously.

'You have these big parties every week, Mrs Prendick?' he asked.

'Almost every week. There are some people who come quite often. But others not. Arthur says that Loose Chippings is the right place at which to try out fresh contacts. And some don't *take* – I wonder if that is the word? We don't, I mean, ever see them again.'

Phil started to say, 'Do you think you'll ever see me again?' But he modified this.

'Does Mr Prendick,' he asked, 'often have down winners like me?'

'Phil, dear – may I call you that? – you know the answer very well. Of course not.'

'Then why me?' Phil flushed as he asked it.

'It is because my husband thinks you are rather an exceptional young man.' For the first time Mrs Prendick hesitated, as if she wanted at once to be tactful and straight.

'Because I got a quarter of a million nicker?'

'Of course, Phil.' She looked at him almost teasingly. 'It wouldn't be just because of your eyes and hair, would it? But

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you must please understand that Arthur is a very clever man, as well as being – as I've said – a really kind one. He sees more in you than your money. You're young. Your principles are good. I myself can see that. I think you must come from a good home.'

'My home's all right,' Phil said quickly. He thought of his auntie and decided he could go as far as that.

'And Arthur says that you are intelligent.' Again Mrs Prendick hesitated, and this time went on rather quickly. 'And he's rather fond of making plans for people.' She put a hand on Phil's arm. 'Phil, dear – Arthur thinks it would answer very nicely.'

'Jean and me marrying?' If he was intelligent, Phil thought, there was no point in pretending to be a fool.

'Of course. If you turn out to be thinking of it, that is.'

It was Phil who hesitated this time. He mustn't say anything that might be going behind Jean.

'But isn't there anybody else?' he asked. 'A young man in her own class and all?'

'Oh, I don't think so!' Mrs Prendick looked surprised. 'There was somebody, I believe. But my husband – and Jean's family – very much disapproved of him.'

'Weren't *his* principles good?' Asking this, Phil saw that he liked Mrs Prendick so much that he could risk teasing her a bit in turn.

'I didn't hear anything against them. But unfortunately he had no money *at all*. And Jean's people are not wealthy. They're not even prosperous.'

'I see.' What Phil thought he was seeing was that this other young man couldn't be Moore. A baronet or whatever Moore was couldn't have no money at all. 'So it was off?' he asked. 'Would you say Jean would marry, or not marry, who she was told?'

'I am quite sure that Jean wouldn't marry without having what are considered the proper feelings, Phil.'

There was something in the way Mrs Prendick said this that troubled Phil.

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'Love and that?' he asked awkwardly.

'And that – certainly.' Mrs Prendick had said this with a sudden coldness that made Phil almost start back. And quickly she again laid a hand on his arm. 'All these things are different,' she said, 'when you look back on them long, long after they are over. They are so strong, and – don't hurry me – so fragile, vulnerable, impermanent. My heart stops, when I see young people in the power of them.'

There was a long silence, and then Mrs Prendick stood up and turned back towards the house. Phil walked beside her thoughtfully. He was very much impressed by this talk with her. And – at quite the same time – it would be fair to say it didn't mean a thing. He might have been a schizo, that is, for all the tie-up there seemed to be between the Phil of this rational conversation and the Phil who wanted Jean Canaway. Still, there were more things he wanted to know.

'*You* think me and Jean should marry?' he asked.

Mrs Prendick paused in her walk to look at him gravely again.

'I have no advice to give you,' she said. 'None at all.'

'But an opinion, like?'

'Judging by what I have seen since you arrived, Phil, it would be a marriage starting with one or two advantages. It might also – I just don't know – be starting with some disadvantages that became – don't hurry me – prominent and preponderant later on. But then the number of marriages of which *all* that is true must be very large.'

'I never thought.' One Phil – you might say the sagacious Phil – was really seeing that he had never been very largely reflective in this field. But the other Phil – the Phil who was very much physically alive and kicking – was suddenly just wanting to get away from this old lady and to join a much younger one. 'Of course,' he said, 'I don't know about afterwards. About marriage much later on, I mean. But you have to take a chance, like.'

'Of course you have.' She had turned to him with a renewed warmth, but now she was looking round her garden. 'It would

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all stop, otherwise. Nobody to plant roses, and nobody to gather them.'

Phil laughed.

'But about that long table,' he said. 'If me and Jean had one.'

'Long table?' She was puzzled. She was old, Phil thought, and didn't remember.

'With a house-party and all. Would Jean be feeling, do you think, that I was there at the other end only because she'd had a failure of nerve?'

'It's possible, of course.' Mrs Prendick was dispassionate again. 'But you know' – and she turned to look squarely at him – 'if Jean *does* marry you it will be just with failure of nerve that she won't have the slightest reason to reproach herself.'

'She'll be a heroine,' Phil said. He heard how his own voice sounded happy and careless. It was because, any minute now, he'd be finding Jean. But he realized that Mrs Prendick had been trying to help him. He was just going to say – no doubt awkwardly – 'Thanks a lot' when he saw that she had turned quickly away and entered the house. She would be passing, it occurred to him, that Family Tree, and those gentlemen in wigs who could hardly be the ancestors of a gardener – not even a gárdener who worked for a duke.

## *Chapter Twenty-one*

PHIL might have been quicker at getting clearer with Jean – at least events wouldn't have happened so on top of each other on the Monday morning – if it hadn't been for the way things got across him the evening before. It began with a kind of argument with a cynical old man called Bevington.

It's not so bad, of course, old people being cynical as young. If you take a straight look at life you see there's at least an excuse for it in the way life seems to batter people about. You wouldn't call Mrs Prendick cynical – but you could guess that there had been times when she'd had to catch hold of herself,

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and get out into the garden quick, to stop herself going that way. Another thing you can see is that, with some people, a great deal of success doesn't stop them turning cynical. This Bevington was a regular associate of Prendick's – not just one of the new contacts being tried out – and Jean said he was a bigger tycoon than her uncle by quite a bit. Certainly you could tell he was a heavy-weight in his line. He must have been over 12st. 7lb. all right, and you felt at once the same thing about his personality, as they say. Well, you'd expect what you might call a certain largeness going with that. At least Phil expected it. He'd have been more careful if he hadn't been imagining Bevington that way.

Phil was sitting with some people after tea in a loggia – it's an affair Cotswold Manors have several of – and he didn't drift away because he wasn't sure when people did. At least he wasn't sure when men did. For on this occasion it was the women who had drifted away, leaving the men among the sandwiches and fancies and alarmingly fragile tea-cups. It seemed the wrong way round, that. Anyway, it was a general thing he'd noticed about this party – that the sexes tended to separate out. He was surprised, because he'd always supposed that the politer you got the more you kept mixed up. But here was just this group of men, talking finance and that, and this Bevington in the middle of them, starting in on smoking a big cigar.

Phil, of course, kept mum. *He* wasn't going to talk finance. His position was kind of delicate, seeing finance was something he very much had and at the same time entirely hadn't. So he just sat still, letting his eyes wander to another group of guests, who were fooling around with some golf-clubs and golf-balls in a paddock in front of the house. When he didn't look at them, he looked at the dogs. He liked looking at the dogs, because they reminded him of Alice Thickthorne. Only the funny thing was that Alice's dogs were a joke. She was always going to look after them, but they didn't really exist. At Loose Chippings, on the other hand, real dogs were very numerous, and nobody paid any attention to them. It was like they'd been bought with the furniture. Phil supposed there must be a dog-man or dog-maid who came on duty as required.

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Phil was watching the dogs when this Bevington spoke to him. He saw afterwards that the man had done this to be polite. But he somehow did it so that what he was really doing was showing the others they *weren't* polite, and that it was because he was a cut bigger than they were that he knew it was proper to pay attention to this silent young prole. Which wasn't quite fair, in a way, seeing that most of them had done their best with Phil at one time or another. So it was all false and awkward, rather. And then Bevington did have this way of talking – dry, you might say, and almost sarky.

'And what do you have it in mind to do now, Tombs?'

Tombs again, you see. Phil didn't mind that. It was quite natural now. Only he didn't know whether to call Bevington Bevington. He certainly wasn't going to try the Sir business here. They might have got it wrong.

'Oh,' Phil said, 'I'm going back tomorrow to the friends I've been staying with.' He knew it wasn't just immediate movements like that that Bevington had meant. But it wasn't Phil's idea to get talking about his future at large. And there was a bit of a silence, as if he hadn't said enough. So, being a shade nervous, he added, 'Lord Braydon. It's his son Mark's my friend.'

There was an immediate quickening of attention. It happens, when you mention a lord.

'Braydon?' Bevington said, as if he was trying to think. 'Now, I wonder what familiar name that has come to mask?'

Phil didn't understand this, but he knew it wasn't friendly.

'Beg pardon?' he said. And he saw another of these chaps give a kind of indulgent smile.

'I was wondering about the family name,' Bevington said. 'So often one hears these titles, and they turn out to conceal somebody one has known in the City as the highly respectable Smith or Jones – or, for that matter, Rabinovitch or Stein.'

One of the chaps managed a laugh at this. Likely he was hoping, Phil thought, to do some deal with Bevington. But this didn't stop Phil beginning to feel angry. Idea was, it seemed, that Lord Braydon was what Artie Coutts called a



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parvenoo. He wouldn't be any worse if he was, Phil thought. But certainly he wasn't.

'I get,' Phil said. 'But they been where they are quite a time, these friends of mine. Name's Thickthorne.'

'Ah, yes.' Bevington puffed at his cigar and looked at Phil as friendly as you could think. 'And have *you* been there quite a time – as a friend of theirs, I mean?'

Phil flushed. He felt that impertinent was the word for this.

'Matter of days,' he said curtly. And then he added, because he didn't want just to snap at the chap, 'We got interests in common, Lord Mark and me.'

He could hear how comical it sounded. He could *see* how comical it sounded. Because they were all – having manners, after all – being quite careful not to smile. Afterwards, he was to decide that what this Bevington said next wasn't meant malicious. Only he had that dry way of saying things Bevington really saw it as he said. He was giving an honest warning. At least that was the proper thing to think about him, seeing you oughtn't to think evil.

'I've heard it remarked,' Bevington said – and he took another puff at his fat cigar – 'that alert rapacity is the keynote of an impoverished *noblesse*'

It took a second for Phil to work this out. There were two unfamiliar words in it. Then he did.

'They don't know,' he said. 'Not like Mr Prendick.'

There was a silence. And he felt he'd got this wrong. In a way what he'd said was fair. He was at Loose Chippings, and being smiled on as Prendick's niece's suitor – that was the word – because of the money. But at the same time it *wasn't* fair. Because he'd come here, after all, knowing what he was doing. He'd agreed to be Prendick's guest. And Prendick was a decent old chap in his way. If Prendick made his money out of a kind of mild social disease – well, it wasn't for Phil to take up a parson's attitude to that. Anyway, he ought to have kept his mouth shut. Instead of which – well, he just opened it again.

'I like them at Thickthorne,' he said. 'They like things and people for themselves – see? They're not always doing sums.'

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'Sums?' Bevington said. He said it like he was absolutely charming. But there was an ugly look in his eye.

Phil remembered he liked words. They stuck in his head.

'They may be funnies,' he said. 'But with them it's not the bleeding cash nexus all the time.'

You might have expected another silence after this. But Bevington spoke instantly, and as easy as easy. And he was standing up.

'Shall we all,' he said, 'stroll over and join our golfing friends?'

It had seemed to Phil that this was a tactful move on Bevington's part. Phil had allowed himself to out with something that didn't make much sense – not seeing he was a kind of apprentice capitalist spending his first days in the shops. It had been what these people called speaking out of turn, all right. So he went along with the others, not feeling apologetic exactly, but quite wanting to please.

The gardens were at the back of the house, and this was a long paddock that ran down the front of it and quite a way beyond. It was just on the other side of all those mushrooms and Jaguars. There were three men practising what was called driving. They had knobbly clubs on steel shafts, and they seemed to have dozens of balls, and away at the far end of the paddock was a boy that collected the balls every now and then and brought them back on a bicycle. It seemed to Phil rather a feeble way of putting in time, particularly as it seemed so easy. The three men weren't young or athletic. In fact they were just the elderly out-of-condition sort that Prendick collected. But they simply steadied their red faces and pivoted on their fat bellies and swung their thick arms, and away the ball went far further than you'd think it could.

'You a golfer?' one of the men said to Phil as he was standing there. He was a friendly man.

'No,' Phil said. And he added incautiously, 'Never tried.'

'Then try now,' the man said idly.

'Yes, try now,' Bevington said. And he smiled at Phil like they were father and son.

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'I don't mind if I do,' Phil said. He was a cricketer of sorts and he'd been a fair shot. So he knew he had a good eye. It wasn't until he had the club in his hand, and felt the unfamiliar balance of it, that he had misgivings.

'Like this,' the friendly man said. And he went on to give instructions. All the others, of course, were standing around now. Phil swung the club like he'd seen it done, and he watched the ball for all he was worth. Sure enough, he hit it. For a second he thought he'd hit it good. But something must have been wrong, for it buried itself in grass not a dozen yards ahead.

'Topped it,' the friendly man said. 'But not a bad start. Try again.'

'Yes,' Bevington said lightly. 'Try again.'

This time Phil didn't hit it at all. The ball stayed put on its silly little peg. As Phil had put a lot of force into his stroke, the club – and his body with it – swung round in rather an uncontrolled fashion. It must have looked pretty pitiful. So he felt a fool. He saw that two or three of the men had turned away in a carefully casual fashion, as if they were wanting not to embarrass him. This, of course, embarrassed him a lot. And that didn't help with his third attempt. Again he missed the ball completely.

'Much better,' the friendly man said unexpectedly. 'You miss it, of course. But the action was right. You've got the idea now. You'll do it next time.'

Phil saw the man was meaning what he said. He also saw that some of the women had come out on the sweep and were watching from there. He didn't dare to try to make out if Jean was among them. He started once more addressing the ball. This time he had to cope not only with his lack of skill but with a confusion that might get on top of him. He addressed the ball very carefully.

'I'd move your left foot back a little,' Bevington said softly.

Phil did as he was told. The friendly man started to say something, but stopped when he saw Phil had begun his stroke. And this time it was all right. Phil felt the head of the club take the ball crisp and clean. The ball went off like a bullet

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from a gun. Only it didn't go where the other men's balls had been going. It went off at an angle like you wouldn't believe – pretty well straight the way Phil's nose had been pointing as he stood there. A fraction of a second later there was a crash, and the windscreen of one of the grandest cars on the sweep turned to what might have been a sheet of milk. Phil had a vivid instantaneous picture of it – one windscreen gone blind like that and all the other windscreens glaring at him as if he'd been after them too.

Somebody did a shout of laughter. Other people did what you'd call exclamations of well-bred dismay. One of the red-faced men standing round Phil had got redder-faced still, and he said 'It doesn't matter a bit' very quickly, so that Phil knew the car must be his.

Phil heard himself say 'I'll pay'. Afterwards, lying awake in the night, he found there was no comfort in his feeling that nobody had heard this last clueless effort.

### *Chapter Twenty-two*

HE was late down next morning. The fact was that, in spite of there being, you'd think, nothing in the world that counted except just seeing Jean, he had to struggle with himself before he could face the house-party again. As he passed through the hall he looked at the place where letters were laid out, and he saw there was one for him. It had been sent on from Thickthorne, and it was in his auntie's writing. Of course the writing wasn't educated, and the envelope it was on was cheap and flimsy, and Phil felt a bit embarrassed as he picked it up – which shows you, clearly enough, that Loose Chippings wasn't being any too good for him. He picked up the letter and shoved it into a pocket before going along to get some breakfast. If he'd thought at all, he'd probably have gone somewhere and opened the letter quietly. For his auntie wasn't a letter-writer, and her writing at all must mean something.

Breakfast at Loose Chippings was a time when people were very casual with each other. The women mostly had trays in

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their rooms, like they were in a flash hotel, and the men made a great business of just a nod and a word and then picking up a newspaper. Phil put up a good show doing this himself – it wasn't much use being what Jean had called assimilative if you couldn't play up that way when you wanted to – and behind a copy of what turned out to be the *Daily Telegraph* he started trying to get himself straight.

It was funny he had any need to do that, him and Jean having got where they had. For a girl like Jean couldn't be in your arms like that – and time and again, even if in a queerly wordless and just-for-a-minute way – if she hadn't made up her mind deep and serious. Yet he didn't have a feeling he knew quite where he was. And week-ends ended, he supposed, on Monday. Even if they didn't, he'd given Mark a kind of promise to be back that day. So there was only a few hours now to get it clear in. And he had an instinct that there was still a battle in front of him. He didn't mind that. Essentially she'd given in, she had, the very instant she'd become physically aware of him – which had been when she'd drawn back her hand like that, streaked with his blood. It had rather scared him, the first time he'd recognized it. But that's what sex is and love is, he'd thought later. You got to get right down like that to be sure of it. You begin with what pulses and throbs in you. Blood, that is. And afterwards you build as you like.

He'd got no farther than this by the end of breakfast. Whether you could call it getting himself straight he didn't know. But suddenly he felt that he must find Jean instantly, even if it meant tearing down this whole Cotswold Manor that she kept fading back into the way she did. So he threw down his paper and shoved away his second cup of coffee and went in search of her. And he found her just where he hoped he might – out in Mrs Prendick's rose-garden. There were so many roses that he wondered if they were vulgar, like the ones massed in Prendick's office. They didn't *look* vulgar. On almost every petal of every rose, he saw, there was still a drop of dew. You might say it was the right place, and the right hour too, for getting clear with your girl.

'Phil – did you feel an awful fool?'

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She'd asked him this as soon as she'd kissed him and done that quick draw-back again. She'd asked it in a playful sympathizing way that yet had he didn't know what behind it.

'An awful fool?' he said. He didn't see what she was talking about.

'Over that golf. They were being absolutely bloody. I could see they were.'

'Oh, that!' He was laughing and impatient. It was funny that, although he'd been upset at the time, and blushing in the middle of the night, and rather shy of appearing again next morning, it didn't really trouble him all that – and yet here was Jean making a thing of it. 'Look,' he said, 'I'm the new boy. Whatever I do, for years I'll be that. People will be laughing at me. Or they'll be being nice to me. All except them that haven't a thought but to get at my pocket. And my friends, of course. I got friends. But with the others there'll be all this laughing and niceness. Don't think I don't see it. But I don't mind. I mean, I *shan't* mind. Not if I got you. It won't mean a thing.'

She was looking past him, as if she was seeing some picture that wasn't there for him to see. Her hands were on his shoulders, and now they came softly down his arms.

'Phil,' she asked, 'how do you imagine us living? What do you imagine us doing?'

'Shall I tell you?' he said – and went on so that she was flushed and laughing. But in a minute she was frowning and standing back a bit.

'But when we're *not*?' she said. 'Spare moments do come, after all.'

'We'll have to think.' He grinned at her. 'I've had thoughts of a desert island. But that's only in off moments, like. We'll make a tremendous life.' He looked at her earnestly. 'You can *see* it, can't you?'

'I can see *you*,' she said.

He caught hold of her again at that – since she'd said it that way. Yet it wasn't quite an answer, so he knew he still had exploring to do if he was going to understand her.

'Saw me rather sudden, didn't you?' he asked.

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'Yes – I did.' Her blood was speaking in her cheeks, but her eyes were perplexed. 'At that lunch we had, when I was putting on that dead common turn –'

'You weren't doing that,' he cried out, pained.

'But of course I was! The beautiful enigmatic girl, alluring and withdrawing, like in a cheap novel.' She paused. 'As in a cheap novel,' she said – and laughed in a way he didn't get. 'It was disgusting. I wanted you to propose to me.'

'I knew that,' he said.

'You well might. Of course, I was genuinely attracted by a quarter of a million pounds. There's almost nobody that wouldn't be.'

'I seen that. About a lot of people, I mean – not you. It's one of the first things you *do* see.' Phil considered. 'Naturally,' he added.

'Yes, naturally. And then you were very nice looking. You were nice in those expensive clothes that looked only so very slightly wrong on you –'

'That so?' Phil asked. He was really interested, and rather pleased.

'And it was clear that everything underneath would be nice too. Body. All the spontaneous impulses. Everything. Or nearly everything – and none of us can have quite everything after all.'

'You have.' He was quick with this. But it was entirely what she'd just called a spontaneous impulse.

'No, I haven't.' She looked at him more seriously, he felt, than she'd ever done. 'I'm a very commonplace person, Phil, and very ordinary things are important to me. But there we were. If you didn't have everything, you had so much that it seemed almost unfair. There you were – a very wealthy and personable young man – what a foul expression! – who believed he was in love with me. I can almost believe that, in the end, I behaved with some credit.'

'So you did.' He was as quick and as spontaneous with this as he'd been before.

'But it's not true. I didn't deserve any credit for not snatching my handsome and ardent millionaire.' She frowned quickly, as

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if she found something cheap in the words that had come to her. 'You see, there was something between us.'

'That's right,' he said easily. 'Class and that. As I said.'

'It *can't* have been that.' She was really puzzled. 'Because it was something quite sharp and – sensuous. Isolating. Like a curtain between us.'

'And it lifted,' Phil said, cheerful still. 'So what *that* was, was just – well, being a girl. Like a goddess. The haunting one. The moon one. Virginal.'

This time, she looked at him almost comically.

'Well, I'm *that*, you know. The kind of books I read –'

'The highbrow ones?'

'Yes. They say it's a sort of curse to carry around. But there it is. So perhaps you're right.'

Phil felt awkward.

'Pity I'm not one,' he said. 'To match, you might say.'

'A gentleman Diana?' Her brow had cleared and she was laughing at him. 'What rubbish! Everyone knows that leads to a frightful mess.'

'Isn't that them books again?'

'What awfully morbid talk.' She wasn't quite happy. 'I *hope* you're right. I don't feel you are. What are we going to do now?'

'Tell each other more about each other. What about your family, Jean? You haven't told me about them. They like this lot?'

'Uncle Arthur's friends? Not a bit. Of course my mother's his sister. But she's been – well, assimilated.'

'Ah – more of that.' He grinned at her. 'What to?'

'The Army. The Bar. The Church. My father's retired as a colonel. He wasn't a great success.'

He was puzzled.

'That's the same sort of people, isn't it?'

'Not remotely.'

He remained puzzled, but was also pleased.

'You mean your lot's like these friends I have – the Thick-thornes?'

'Not remotely that, either. Something you haven't met yet. The insulated and unchanging English upper middle class.'



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She smiled rather doubtfully. 'Something that wouldn't make sense in any other country in the world. But it's there.'

'Well, let it be there.' He was wondering if all this was what you could call relevant. 'I liked *my* colonel – what I saw of him. He didn't think too badly of me – I mean, of us. Perhaps it will be like that with me and your dad.'

'Of course I'm exaggerating about the insulation. Uncle Arthur's lot, my lot, Lord Braydon's lot – they do flow in and out a bit. But still.' She came to a dead halt.

'But not *my* lot.' His confidence was growing. It was because they'd managed all this serious, even if puzzling talk. 'Where,' he asked, 'does that Moore come in?'

Of course he'd touched something there. It was what you might call the unresolved point. Or one of them.

'That was funk,' Jean said.

'Funk?' He knew she mustn't be let ride away with it in the past tense like that.

'Have a heart, Phil.' He must have spoken in a way that sounded like criticism. 'Hadn't I gone out to lunch with a strange man and behaved like a sexy bitch on the make? And hadn't I at least seemed to make quite sure that I shouldn't see you again? It was all a kind of red light, telling me I might do something silly any time. And then Dolly came along. He's been asking me to marry him almost since we both left school. So I panicked and said Yes.' Suddenly Jean had what he thought of as her wonderful smile. 'There was no more to it than that.'

'And then?' Phil said.

'And then?' She seemed surprised. 'You were brought in on a shutter, Phil – more or less. And this happened.'

'But –?'

'Oh that!' She understood. 'Don't worry about *that*. I'll settle Dolly.'

There was a moment's silence. He supposed he was gazing at her in admiration. That hunting goddess, he seemed to remember, had been pretty ruthless once or twice.

'You going to marry me?' he asked.

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She just hesitated.

'There hardly seems to be any other solution,' she said. And she kissed him and ran into the house.

Phil could hardly believe his happiness. He could so little believe it that he had to look for it. He walked about the garden senselessly, doing this. He was trying to get hold of it as something he could put words to. He didn't know why he wanted to do this, except that he had an instinct to understand things – even, you might say, to measure them. Perhaps this was wrong, since it was a bit like doing sums. He realized that he'd always a little want to do sums. It was part of his nature, and went along with having common sense and keeping a grip on those orders of magnitude. But he'd want always to be with somebody who didn't do sums – who hadn't been born that way, or hadn't been born in the way of it. Which was Jean, of course, when she wasn't belonging to her uncle's world. And he walked about in a kind of daze – ever so dimly aware that he was looking for something.

Warmth was seeping down into this rose-garden out of this first-of-June sky – and suddenly the scent of these roses was overpowering. He went away from them and after something else – this as much by instinct as salmon go up the rivers when they're told to. He found he was in the long riding between the pine trees. He found that he was sitting where he'd sat with Mrs Prendick – old detached Mrs Prendick – the day before. And then he remembered another and even older woman. He remembered his auntie, and that he had a letter from her in his pocket. The letter he'd been ashamed of the look of.

He took it out and opened it and read it.

My dear Nevcau,

I take very kindly the money sent from Nottingham arrived safe here. I did always say you was a good lad. I went down St Ebbe's and got one or two things I have always wanted and cash down the only respekable way not as they do now. Send no more money as there are no more things I want. Plese write if pension rites is affeked by money of this sort. Ma Griffin she went out obliging more than she didn't ought and not telling them chits of girls in

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that office was near put inside. There been more people inkluding one said he was the vikar and we would put up a prayer for you in temptashion but I said I was chapel and showed him the door qik.

Here has been that Beryl's old man said she was pregnant so what. Fine day I said she says that the minnit my lad has some brass and I showed him the door qik. But then comes her ma a respekable woman and says so that I know its true. I did always say that girl was soft but will no more her being the fambly now and hoping you will settle well together her and you and are as this leaves me.

Your affek. auntie

B. Tombs (Mrs)

Phil sat with this letter a long time. The smell of the pine trees reminded him again that this was where he had sat with Mrs Prendick. For a minute he thought he'd try to find her, and talk to her. Then he thought No, it hasn't anything to do with these people – not with any of them.

He put the letter in his pocket and got up and walked back towards the house. In the rose garden there were the roses again. And suddenly he heard Jean's voice, almost as if it wasn't just inside his head, saying, like she had, 'I'll settle Dolly.'

When he got to the house he went up to his room and packed

## *Chapter Twenty-three*

BY the time Phil got out of the train at Oxford he knew this was the largest thing he'd ever had to face and he'd faced it. So it was funny how small things still worried him. There were these suitcases full of the clothes and that that he'd bought in Nottingham. They were too big and heavy to carry without looking silly, and yet he didn't see himself driving up to his auntie's in a taxi, with the Griffins and all that crowd of kids shouting at him. First he thought he'd just leave them in the rack and let the train take them on to nowhere. Someone would get them cheap in the end, so it wouldn't be just waste. But this train from Kingham didn't go on. It was a local one stopped in

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Oxford, and he was afraid that they'd come after him shouting Mister that he'd forgotten his bags. Then he remembered how you left things in Left Luggage, so that was all right.

He walked down from the station. There was a queue for the taxis anyway, for it was the time the Varsity had those rowing races and there were people coming in for them – a lot of them girls dressed like Jean might be dressed. He walked away and he only stopped at King's, where there were still those Ducatis in the window. It was senseless stopping to stare at them, he didn't want another flivver, so he went on quicker now and soon he was in New Street. Here was the Primitive Methodists 1843 and there in the distance was Tom Tower, Christ Church. It came into his head qucerly that they didn't seem so far apart as they'd used to. They pretty well nodded to each other the minute you thought of Prendick's office or of Loose Chippings. That was it.

And here he was. He saw that the lid of the copper was still in the window where he'd stuffed it that night – and it seemed incredible that it had been no time ago. He pushed open the street door and it seemed to catch on something. He thought it must be another piece of damage by the TV people and that he hadn't noticed it before. But when he pushed harder there was a warning cry from inside, so that he had to get in pretty well by 'squeezing through a crack. He stared at what had stopped him. At first it looked like a cage – the hanging kind you keep a parrot in – big enough for an ostrich. But it was more elaborate than that, and knocked up out of cheap chrome and brightly coloured plastics. It was so big that if you moved it towards the door you couldn't use the door, and if you moved it towards the stairs you couldn't use the stairs.

'Ain't it fair lovely, our Phil?' It was his auntie speaking, and in a doating kind of voice he'd never heard from her.

'What you keep in it?' he asked. The thing still bewildered him.

'It's a lamp, love. What they call a standard. I always did want one of them. And a nice piece of glass for over the chimbley.'

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He looked at the fireplace. Over the mantelpiece there was a new mirror, with flowers and ferns and things etched into the glass all round, and big lozenges of different coloured glass at the four corners. And suddenly he remembered Mrs Prendick, and how she'd have liked gnomes and pixies among the mushrooms.

'That's lovely,' he said gently. 'Nothing else?'

'There weren't anything else I ever wanted, I didn't.' She looked at him rather anxiously. 'And there was nearly three pounds' change.'

'You couldn't have chosen better.' He was amazed. He'd never had an idea she coveted such things. He could have got them for her on the never-never as easy as easy – him bringing back fourteen nicker a week. He stared at the hideous objects and realized that he'd come home.

'I can't light the gas with this thing.' A familiar voice had spoken in the back kitchen. 'Haven't you got a match?'

'Box is empty.' This was a familiar voice too. 'Try giving it a quick jerk, like.'

Phil stared again at his auntie, and then edged between her and her new lamp. He went through the far door. George Pratley was perched on the little table. Peter Sharples was standing by the gas stove with a kettle in his hand. George gave his slow solid smile, and Peter, from under his black fringe, this look he had of quick thinking.

'Hi'ya, Phil,' George said rather shyly. 'Me and Sharples been got acquainted along of you.'

'And I had your telegram,' Peter said. He picked up a teapot. 'Just going to mash,' he said happily. 'If I may, Mrs Tombs?'

'You don't mash too badly, you don't,' Phil's auntie said graciously. She looked from one to another of the three young men, and you could see a bold resolution forming in her. There had been, after all, nearly three pounds' change. 'I think I'll just look over to Sidaway's,' she said, 'and get you some pikelets and a plate of fancies.' And she reached for her purse and tottered out.

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'What's pikelets?' George Pratley asked.

'Crumpets, *you'd* call them,' Peter Sharples said with some North Country contempt. He'd put the kettle on the gas, and now he climbed on the table beside George. 'Well,' he said, 'here we are.'

There was a moment's silence. They both sat looking at Phil like they were a judge and jury. He had an absurd idea they might be what you'd call acting for Beryl's dad and mum. But they were just thinking, he supposed, that he'd been mucking around dead silly.

'Come off it,' he said cheerfully – although that wasn't how he was feeling. 'It isn't a funeral, it isn't. It don't even require bigamy. The Archbishop of Canterbury hasn't married me to anybody by special licence. A sweet virgin, I am.' He winked at George. 'Like old Peter here.'

With Peter this didn't seem to go down either good or bad. He just went on looking at Phil in that thinking way. But George responded to the demand for a lighter note.

'And me thinking pikelets was fish,' he said. 'Like it might be instead of a fatted calf in that story out of Sunday School.'

Phil shook his head.

'No call to think I've been living all that prodigal,' he said – and grinned at Peter. 'Old Sackbutt still got all the gravy, except as much as don't count.'

'Then why come back?' George asked. 'Not if you're not yet right down to them husks and things.'

Phil thought this was getting a bit silly. He was sure they knew – although his telegram to Peter hadn't said all that, so that he didn't know *how* they did.

'You know about me and Beryl?' he asked, to make sure of this.

'We know about Beryl, all right,' George said. 'There's them as can't keep their gobs shut. And a good thing too.'

Phil didn't quite get this, but his impatience grew.

'See here,' he said, 'I better not wait for this tea and cakes. I better get round and see Beryl now.'

'You're not going to see her,' Peter said.

'Not never again, you're not,' George agreed.

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He stared at them. He had a wild idea that somehow, and because of this thing, she must be dead.

'Nothing's happened?' he asked.

'Nothing's happened that *you* had much to do with,' George said grimly. 'Fancying yourself, you been. Imagining yourself – careful old Phil Tombs – given to wild careless rapture. A comedy, that is. You *ever* been careless?' George didn't wait for a reply. 'Of course not. But Fred Prescott – he been careless. A bastard like that would be, wouldn't he? Beryl's kid won't be yours, man. It'll be Fred's. That's what.'

It was strange to think of afterwards – but the fact was Phil had pretty well rushed at George Pratley. He might have hit him, if Peter hadn't laid a gentle hand on him.

'Phil,' he said, 'it must be something hard to believe. But it's true. They say so. Both of them.'

'Didn't you have a clue?' George asked.

Phil shook his head. He was dazed. He remembered there had been something – something about Beryl and Fred Prescott and a car – but he couldn't remember quite what. Only he knew that there were other things about Beryl that he was going to remember quite soon.

'I pretty well knew he'd pinched your girl,' George said. 'Tried to give you a hint, I did. But you got to be careful with a thing like that. Got round her with his talk, he must have done. For what else has he, I ask you?' George paused, as if rather hoping for debate on this aspect of the matter. Meeting silence, he went on, 'Not that *she* didn't have a bit of edge on *him*. Made him change his hair-style.'

'She was frightened,' Phil said suddenly. 'She was terrified, poor kid. The last time we went together, George. She must have known then about the baby. Wanted to tell me. Wanted to get it straight about it being Fred's, I expect. And she seemed like she didn't know which way she was going.' He paused. 'See here – Fred Prescott or not – I got to go to her. Now.'

'Wait a bit.' It was Peter who spoke. He had been silent for some time. 'Don't think I haven't got a lot of sympathy for the girl. I don't suppose she was dead promiscuous. You'd have

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been bound to know about that. I don't think I'd even say you had much to complain of, Phil. You were having her in a quiet steady way – and then, so to speak, she let this other chap in on it. Well, she acted against a sort of rough and ready folk-ethic that the working class – our class – has run up in the last generation or so. You can't say more than that. So let's feel sympathetic, as I said. Particularly' – Peter paused, with his thoughtful gaze on Phil – 'when we think of the money.'

'The money?' Phil hadn't thought of it.

'What she saw she'd just missed.'

Phil suddenly flushed scarlet. It came back to him how Beryl had behaved when he had at last managed to tell her about his fortune that afternoon. And something else.

'She got me away,' he said.

'Yes – she got you away.' Peter spoke very gently now. 'She thought – poor kid – that if she could have a week's grace she could somehow rub out this Fred Prescott from the record. The child she was going to have would be yours, and she'd be married to a millionaire after all. Just as she'd dreamed.'

'Dreamed?' Phil said.

'Just as every uneducated girl, fed on worthless films and magazines and advertisements, dreams.' Peter spoke almost coldly this time. 'It's bad luck, about a twentieth-century shop girl. You're not within reach of much sense.'

'And she got some way with it,' George said. 'She got to getting her parents put it across your aunt. But the trouble was Fred. Whether he'd wanted her permanent or not, he wasn't going to fade out silently before no bleeding millionaire. Not very rational, Fred Prescott isn't. *Some* sort of a man, he is. And it came out at Beryl's home in a grand row last night. I had it all from Fred this morning.'

There was another silence, in which they heard the lid of the kettle jumping. It had been boiling without any of them noticing it.

'I *got* to see her,' Phil said. 'I got to tell her *I* been unfaithful. In my heart, like – where it's worst. See?'

Peter shook his head.

'I wouldn't. It would be for your own ease, that would. Not



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hers. Leave her. There must be things she likes about this Prescott. Perhaps quite good things, and it may all grow a bit. But it won't be helped by you shoving in and showing what nice feelings you have.'

Phil's flush deepened.

'I mean more than that,' he said. 'It's me ought to marry her – still.'

And suddenly Peter Sharples was angry.

'Look,' he said. 'you're conceited. You've got a good opinion of yourself, Phil Tombs. And no call to – not in this. You and this girl were a mess. Just that. She's not your sort. You're not hers. This Prescott's somebody she'd *taken refuge with* – get? It doesn't mean she mayn't be a decent girl in a clueless way. I don't know. Perhaps George here knows. But don't you go bewildering her again with some rotten Galahad my-heart-is-pure guff. *Forget it* – sec?'

There was a sort of shattered silence that can follow a last word being spoken. And then the back-kitchen door opened. It was Phil's auntie.

'Would you believe it?' she said. 'Sidaway's was right out of fancies. I had to look right over at Cheeseright's. And have you mashed now?' She looked contentedly round the three young men as she put a bag and a little cardboard box down on the table. 'Now if we just had our Beryl,' she said dutifully, 'wouldn't it be a fambly party?'

Phil and Peter talked late that night in Peter's room in college. It was quite something, Phil's going in there. And a bit of an anti-climax in a way. Peter's room was another room much like Phil's room – larger, perhaps, but right up in a steeply-pitched roof. There was a narrow bed that was a disgrace, and two wicker chairs – the kind you see in illustrations in old-fashioned novels – that creaked whether you were in them or not. There were a couple of shelves of books, not as many as you'd expect, and there was a record-player and a lot of L.P. records more modern than Phil came down to. There was a colour-print of Van Gogh's Sunflowers on the wall that Peter was a bit ashamed of – like he was about sex and the

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working class, Phil told him – because in a couple of years he'd got right beyond it in what you might call artistic sophistication. The carpet was another disgrace, being mostly holes, and Phil was staggered to hear Peter had to hire it, and the bed and chairs and all, from the college.

'You're soft,' he said, 'if you pay out money for the use of that. Wouldn't fetch two bob cash down in our junk shop.'

'I get a rebate, in a way,' Peter said. He loved working things out. 'I make it that I get eightpence-halfpenny from this college for every tanner my county pays it.'

'Charity kid, both ways, like?'

'Just that. We're all that here. Even your friend Aubrey Moore. You can't come in here without doing a bit of sponging on pious old parties who put down money in the sixteenth century. I sometimes wonder what they'd think of us. More cocoa?'

They were really drinking cocoa. Phil had thought it would be vintage port. And Peter had made a very large omelet on a very small gas-ring. Against regulations, he'd explained.

That sort of thing tickled Phil.

'A lot of kid's rules you have in a place like this,' he said. 'I don't know how you can take them, I don't. Not after National Service and that.'

'It's a kind of game,' Peter said. 'Know how you're going to get out of this?'

'Walk, I'd say.'

'Not a bit. You'll have no business in here after midnight. The place will be locked up. You'll get out by climbing a tree, and out along a branch, and down a lamp-post.'

'Can do,' Phil said easily.

'The trunk of the tree goes up quite smooth for fifteen feet.'

'We can think about it,' Phil said.

'We don't need to. There's a ladder to get you up the tree. It's supposed to have been left about carelessly. But it's been there ever since we had a new Dean eight years ago. He decided against any more accidents.'

'Sensible of him,' Phil said. He was thinking they must all

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be kids together – Deans, undergrads and what have you. ‘But I’d go psycho, I would, locked up at nights.’

‘Oh, yes – I dare say.’ Peter wasn’t doing much of the talking. And Phil was talking quite a lot. He was telling Peter everything. It didn’t seem to trouble Peter that he was doing this with only half his mind. Because, of course, Phil was thinking all the time of his future, really. He had a future now.

‘And tomorrow I’m going back,’ Phil said.

‘To this Chippings place? Another round of golf?’

‘To London. She’ll be at the office.’

‘I was thinking of going up to London tomorrow. Perhaps I’ll come with you.’ Peter had that considering look.

‘You?’ Phil said, mocking. ‘Let you off, will they?’

‘They let your friend Moore off.’ Peter grinned. ‘And I’m in much more favour than he is. Not that I need leave to go away for the day.’ He took a swig of cocoa. ‘By the way,’ he said – and he seemed rather elaborately casual – ‘why, shouldn’t you and I go abroad together?’

‘On that three pounds’ balance of yours?’ Phil asked. He could say anything to Peter now. And he was pleased by this suggestion. Not that it meant anything to him. He had other plans.

‘I’ve won one of the University prizes. Probably no other entrants.’ Peter was blushing. ‘Thought it would be the complete works of Lord Macaulay in full morocco. But it was a cheque for fifty quid. And an admiring President of this ancient college has added twenty more. We could go places.’

‘So we could.’ Phil was meaning to go places – but not with old Peter. ‘I’ll add five hundred, and we’ll go to Paree. Paint Pig Street red, we will.’

Peter laughed. He’d heard enough to understand this.

‘You’d be let add no more than your own seventy out of all that easy gravy. And we’d do two months on it. I could get away as soon as I’ve kept my term. Before the rest, that is. The dons are eating out of my hand just now.’ He paused, and noticed Phil’s silence. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘I’ll come to town tomorrow. Give you a nod from the Second Class.’

‘What you want to do in London?’ Phil felt an odd uneasi-

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ness. He'd come to think Peter Sharples was a very deep one indeed.

'Oh – I want to go to the Tate.'

'What's the Tate?'

'Just a strip-tease joint, Phil. Lots of nudes.'

Phil remembered a little late in the day that the Tate was a picture gallery.

'You might replace them gaudy sunflowers,' he said, 'with something more artistically mature, like.' He'd got back on Peter with that one. 'You really coming? I'd like you to meet –'

'Yes – I'm coming,' Peter had interrupted Phil almost sharply. And now he got up and shoved around the cups and plates. 'Nice of you to tell me everything, Phil,' he said, as if changing the subject. 'You're rather good at narrative. Those people at Thickthorne and those people at Prendick's place – I feel I've met them.' He paused. 'Know about them,' he added.

'That's fine,' Phil said. He was feeling obscurely troubled. 'It's really because you want to go to this Tate?'

'Partly that.' Peter was looking at him in that odd way – like he was reading a book and doing some work on it. 'And partly because violent delights have violent ends.'

'What's that?'

'It's Shakespeare again. And now I'd better get you up that tree.'

### *Chapter Twenty-four*

THE tree and lamp-post had been easy enough. The climb made Phil conscious, all the same, that his body still had bruises on it. He could even feel some of them just as he was sitting next morning in the train. It had been no time ago, that fight. Nothing had been any time ago. The whole new landscape of his life was no older than his hitting up with Peter Sharples. And Peter, sitting opposite to him now like he might have been his oldest friend, was what you'd really have to call a recent acquaintance. But then time was like that. You couldn't measure it just on clocks. There was nothing to make

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him uneasy in how quick it had all happened to him. At least there shouldn't be.

All the same, he didn't feel quite right with himself. It was as if he'd been bruised more than where they'd kicked him. Here he was – free and with Jean before him. He realized how desperately this freedom was what he'd wanted, and how he'd felt there was only a shabby road to it. He'd have ended on that road, all right – or if he hadn't it would have been on account of some hidden Phil Tombs he didn't know about. But now it was the simple truth that he didn't in all the world have a single tie he didn't want to have. The way Peter had put it about Beryl was brutal but it was dead right. Beryl had ditched him because she preferred another chap. Perhaps a bit she hadn't known her own mind, that last afternoon. Still, that was the plain fact, and it wasn't altered by her making a muddled attempt at a come-back along of all his money. She preferred Fred Prescott, and now she'd marry him. Well, that was all right by Phil. It was so miraculously this – so much a muddle cancelled and a burden lifted – that he just couldn't connect it with the obscure way he felt angry and bruised inside now. It was queer that anything lying behind him could be in his mind at all, seeing that Jean was now less than an hour ahead. They'd go to the same restaurant, he thought. They'd have the same risotto and the same Chianti. Only this time they'd be engaged.

They were through Reading, and Peter was reading *The Times* like he didn't want to talk much. He seemed to go through the paper systematically from front to back.

'What you want to read all that for?' Phil asked challengingly.

Peter lowered the paper only for a moment. He was looking as serious as Phil had ever seen, so that Phil thought there was perhaps a crisis in politics or economics or even philosophy.

'You come on things,' Peter said. 'Even on the Court page.'

'Court page? That judges and juries?'

Peter smiled faintly.

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'No,' he said. 'It's the gentry getting born and christened and engaged and married and dined and wine and buried. We'll make it one day – you and me.'

'I'd be boggered first,' Phil said robustly. But he didn't mean it.

Peter came as far as Prendick's office. Then he said 'Seeing you' vaguely, and went off. It seemed he was a bit shy of fixing up what would mean his meeting Jean later that day. Which was right enough, perhaps. Phil let him go. It was natural that Phil shouldn't be much thinking of Peter.

There was a new porter. You'd expect that, he thought with a grin.

'Will you send my name up to Miss Canaway, please? Mr Tombs.' The man turned to his telephone. It was funny, Phil thought, how quickly you picked up all that. And then in a minute that panel of black glass was sliding back and he was in the lift. He hardly needed it. He felt like he could have floated up to the roof.

The roses were gone, and there were great spurs of red and white gladioli. He didn't like them. Or rather he just didn't like there being this showy change of scene. She was standing behind her desk that had files and telephones on it, and she was paler than he'd ever seen her.

'Jean!' he said, going forward. There was a tiny silence. 'Hi'ya,' he added with a grin.

'You went away very . . . abruptly.' She looked like she was just saying the first thing that came into her head.

'I said good-bye to Mrs Prendick. And you got my note, didn't you?'

'Yes, I got your note. It didn't say much. Why did you dash off like that?'

'It was my . . . It was the girl.'

He saw her take breath.

'The one you told me about?'

'The one you asked me about. Beryl's the name. I had a letter. She's going to have a baby.' He blurted it out. 'But it wasn't me. It was another chap. Behind my back, like. So it's

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all over, that. Of course it was over, anyway. But now – well, she wants it that way too.'

'Phil – you realize it was absolutely crazy?'

'Crazy?' He didn't stop to get what this was directed at. 'Jean,' he said, 'you told that Aubrey Moore?'

She went paler, if that was possible.

'My engagement's been published,' she said. 'In *The Times* this morning.'

He stared at her stupidly.

'*The Times*?' he said. 'The Court page?'

'I don't know. Yes, I suppose it's called that.' She was impatient at this senseless question. 'Anyway, it's in.'

'Couldn't you have stopped it?' Pretty well, he wasn't following.

'Don't you *see* it was crazy – that . . . that idea about you and me?' Over her wretched face there had come a horrible approximation to that wonderful smile. 'A bout of week-end madness. It's a thing that happens.'

He just thought he had a whole big fight in his hands again, and he took a step forward.

'No! Get back!' She had cried it out in a panic that staggered him, and he found that he had halted dead.

'Jean,' he said very gently, 'what is it? *Please* what is it? Think. You *got* to think.'

'I've *been* thinking. It's the trouble. I've been seeing myself. As I am. Not as a heroine.'

'A heroine?' he said. There was some dull echo in the word.

'I can *imagine* myself doing extraordinary things. But it's as if it was in a book or a play. Really I'm an ordinary person, as I told you. Timid. Utterly conventional.' The words were coming fast now, and he saw she was prepared to say anything that was the ghost of an explanation of something she seemed scarcely to understand. 'I truly think you carried me away, for a time, as – as a lover must. But when I *think*, Phil, about everything that's familiar to me, and then about you and me married' – she had a long hesitation, and then got it desperately out – 'I feel my whole *body* going back on me. It's –' She faltered and was silent.

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'Like it was a clergyman?' He knew his face was ablaze with blood. 'Like it was a black?'

'Don't Phil! Please, please don't go on.' She was pleading, but he saw too that somehow she was quite hard. 'For I *can't*.' She managed again, very wanly, a smile. 'I can't, like,' she said.

Within the seconds that the lift took to drop him to earth he seemed to know the whole of how bad it was. The horror of this humiliation was that it was *just* a humiliation, and that it was becoming fused with another that he'd hardly known was there. He'd been prepared to ditch Beryl and he didn't ever want to see her again now. But that didn't alter how he felt when he faced it that a chap he despised had lifted Beryl from him. And something he despised – call it class and that – had lifted Jean from him. And what was left of it all was nothing but resentment and wounded vanity. He couldn't believe that there was a corner of himself that he'd ever respect again.

As he stepped out of the lift he thought how he'd been bundled into it, all bleeding, by that gang of crooks. And he remembered how he'd thought they were going to throw him into the river. It came to him that there was an idea in that. The river couldn't be far off. Only, perhaps, he'd have to wait for darkness.

'A gentleman waiting for you, sir.'

It was the new porter – the new porter in the old one's silly kind of uniform – who had come up and spoken to him. And Phil hadn't time to turn before there was a hand took him firmly by the elbow.

'I've got a taxi,' Peter Sharples said – for of course it was him. 'So come along, man. And you'll have to smile.'

'Where you taking me?' Phil asked when they'd got into the cab. He asked it like a kid.

'Out of England,' Peter said grimly. 'That's why you've got to raise a smile. Five years on, you won't want a bloody tragedy looking at you out of your passport photograph – which is what we're going to have taken now. Believe me.'



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'I got to get back to Mark and that.' Phil spoke out of a kind of stupor.

'I know you have.' Peter spoke in a slow level way like he might be a hypnotist. 'But you're going to have a little change of air first. Walking, mostly. So you'll need a pair of shoes a damned sight more sensible than *those*.' And Peter pointed with a gracing contempt to the floor of the cab.

'A bit parvenoo, are they?' Phil thought he'd managed the ghost of a grin, but perhaps he hadn't. 'Peter,' he asked presently, 'why you come back to that Prendick's office?'

'I kind of knew, man. You see, I just didn't much like anything I heard.'

'I see,' Phil said humbly. Although he didn't. Then he thought of something else. 'How does it go on,' he asked, '- that bit about violent delights?'

'They in their triumph die.'

'Peter - I'll never get over this.'

'Probably not,' Peter said.

'Peter' - Phil had sat up at the café table - 'did you see *that* one?'

Peter nodded casually. It was five weeks later. They'd done quite a bit of walking. And you can't - not at twenty-one - count time on clocks.

'Nice way the skirt moves,' Peter said. 'Tip-top complexion, too. It's the air up here. Urbino's windy hill.'

'Yes.' Phil was gazing across the little piazza. Already he was thinking of something else. 'What you say the name of the chap did that Flagellation?' he asked.

'Piero. See more of him later.'

'Uhuh. Why those three - remember? - just chatting as it goes on? It doesn't seem religious, that doesn't.'

'Nobody knows. It's a celebrated iconographical problem.'

'I see.' Phil allowed this the tribute of a moment's respectful silence. 'And *that* one!' he then said.

'Come off it, you dirty old man.' Nobody could have guessed from Peter's uninterested tone that this was about the

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first day Phil had allowed that girls exist. 'Poor man's sport, that is, Phil. Capitalist like you has other concerns.'

'That's right,' Phil said contentedly. 'I got to think, Peter.' His eye was still following in luxurious innocence the figure of this second mountain maid. 'I got to think big.'

'Just that,' Peter said. Well pleased with himself – and having seen plenty of Italian girls before – he sat back and gazed at the incredible sky.

### *Chapter Twenty-five*

'THERE you are!'

Mark Thickthorne had thrown down his newspaper, and now he thumped it violently.

'There you are!' he said. 'We're in the first week of August – and already they're softening us up about the winter.'

'Softening us up?' his father asked mildly. 'I'd have thought we ought to be hardened for an English winter.'

'Preparing the public for some outrageous shortages of their rotten solid fuel. We'd like to keep your home fires burning – but unfortunately there won't be enough shunters, guards and footplate staff. It says just that. And why won't they have these people? Because they can't pay them enough. Why can't they pay them enough? Because the whole method's uneconomic. It's a vicious circle.'

'Your head's a vicious circle,' Phil said. He hadn't been back long, but he'd slipped back easily. 'Not that you're not right. But it don't help – not just blowing your top. We got to get on with the job.'

'I don't doubt,' Lord Braydon said, 'that we'll get on quicker now that you're back at Thickthorne.' He spoke entirely without reproach. 'You provide Mark with a certain ballast, if I may say so. Not that we've been entirely idle. You'll find we've made decided progress with that expansion valve. And I've been going into the matter of financing our Pilot Scheme. It will need a surprising amount of money.'

'I got money,' Phil said. It was the second time he'd managed

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to say this. The first time, Lord Braydon had passed it over absently, so that Phil had seen he'd been being polite about what he took to be something you'd call naive. But he had to take some notice of it now.

'Ah, yes,' Lord Braydon said. 'We can all dip into our savings in the good cause.' He looked at Phil in a kind of reserved but friendly way he had. 'We'll have a private company. With five and ten pound shares – something like that.'

Alice Thickthorne, who was pouring out coffee for them all at the breakfast table, burst out laughing. 'Daddy,' she said, 'you don't understand – and Mark doesn't either. Phil has an *enormous* sum of money. He told me yesterday. He got it by gambling.'

'By gambling?' Lord Braydon asked, rather gravely. 'When you were abroad? Have you been to Monte Carlo?'

But now Mark was staring at Phil.

'Or was it earlier?' he asked. 'I've sometimes wondered about you, just a little. But, of course, one doesn't ask questions about a man's private affairs.'

'It's for a man,' Alice said – and Phil wasn't sure which of them the kid was making fun of – 'to come forward with his own modest information.' She turned to her father. 'Phil's a confirmed gambler,' she said. 'You can see it in those desperate, haunted eyes.'

Lord Braydon didn't seem to find this amusing. Phil had to explain himself in an atmosphere of some seriousness.

'And I think,' Lord Braydon said, 'that it isn't as a student that you live in Oxford at present? You are on the industrial side?'

Phil agreed he was on the industrial side.

'You have problems in front of you Mark – wouldn't that be right?'

'We all have that.' But Mark, too, was looking at Phil in a serious and considering way. It was clear that, for the time being, British Omnigas and the Thickthorne Pilot Scheme had gone clean out of any Thickthorne head.

'I got to get a training,' Phil said. 'I see that. Even an education – if it's not too late.'

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Lord Braydon smiled for the first time since this news had broken.

'I sometimes tell Alice,' he said, 'that time is passing over her – and that she isn't gathering her academic rosebuds with quite the diligence she ought. And Alice is only sixteen. But, of course, that is only a tiresome habit that fathers have.'

'That's all right, Daddy,' Alice said. 'I don't mind a bit.'

'My dear, I wasn't precisely designing an apology. My point is – to come to it more directly – that Phil has not, in my judgement, ceased to be educatable.'

'The other question,' Mark said, 'being whether Alice has begun.'

Alice was industriously piling a plate with bacon.

'Don't,' she said, 'let's get lost in irrelevant recrimination. Let's start educating Phil.'

'That's it.' Phil spoke quickly, for he was afraid that Alice was going to get squashed for her last remark. 'Matter of fact, I seen a man in Oxford. A professor. He says I got to go to Cambridge.'

'Phil – you wouldn't dare!' Alice seemed to be really angry – just in Mark's sudden way. 'You promised me my first Commem. ball.'

'But it will take two years, like I thought,' Phil went on. He was quite comfortable sometimes ignoring Alice Thickthorne now. 'When I'd talked to this professor a bit' – Phil blushed – 'when he'd talked to me a bit, I mean, he said he'd fix a college, all right. But there's a Varsity exam.'

'A University examination,' Alice said.

'You be quiet,' Phil said. You had to speak out sometimes with this kid. 'It would have to be home study, like. And I was wondering if' – he hesitated, and blushed again – 'if I could do it here. While giving Mark a hand, any way I can. Lab. boy, as they say.'

Lord Braydon did take a second to think about this. But, when he spoke, it was all matter-of-fact.

'Certainly you can,' he said. 'I see no difficulty. You have this money. You can have resident coaches, and so on. I suppose you'll plan to read Engineering at the Varsity?' He gave

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his daughter a cold look. 'I understand that Cambridge does that sort of thing very well.'

Phil nodded. He was suddenly feeling so happy and so sure of himself that he made the nod enormously casual.

'So they say,' he said. 'Not' – he added loyally – 'that they don't say it's pretty good at Oxford too.'

Alice found him again that afternoon in the part of Mark's lab. he'd taken over.

'I've thought of something,' she said.

'What's that?' He'd looked up absently from his drawing.

'About those coaches. We'll have no difficulty in putting them up. We got a coach-house.'

'We *have* got a coach-house,' Phil said seriously. 'You mustn't get talking common.' He was thinking they made the same sort of jokes, him and this kid. 'Now you get along,' he said. 'There's work waiting for me, young Alice.'

*Another Penguin by J. I. M. Stewart*

A USE OF RICHES

1960

You would have said that Rupert Craine had nothing to fear from life. As a wealthy, cultured banker, he treated problems of high finance and additions to his collection of paintings with equal seriousness. Not that he was either pompous or vain – Craine knew only too well that he lacked the genius of his wife's first husband, the brilliant artist John Arnander, killed in Italy in the war.

But a series of shocks imperilled Craine's happiness. Odd drawings, claimed as 'posthumous Arnanders', appeared on the market. And then a telegram summoned the Craines to Italy, where they discovered how grotesquely and irresistibly the past could explode into the present.

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*Cover drawing by Adrian Bailey*

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